

“We All Fail When We Fail to Try”

Acton Congregational Church (UCC)

19 September 2021

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Texts: James 3:13-4:8

Mark 9:30-37

“Then they came to Capernaum; and when he was in the house he asked them, “What were you arguing about on the way?” But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another who was the greatest.”

– Mark 9:33-34

Prayer

Open our hearts, O God, to your faith-giving Spirit.

Open our minds to your faith-nurturing Word.

Speak to us this morning and startle us once again

With your power to make us more human and more Christ-like. Amen.

Every time I fly to Brazil by myself, the famous line from the 1994-Oscar-winning film “*Forrest Gump*” crosses my mind before I find my seat. “***Life is a box of chocolates... You never know what you’re going to get.***”ⁱ These words describe with remarkable accuracy the rich, surprising, and unavoidable variety of seatmates I have had over the years. I remember vividly the Swiss man that worked for the World Bank who drank a bit too much wine during dinner and snored like a wild bear next to my ear all night while I prayed in vain for the hours to go by faster. I already told you in one of my sermons about the young Evangelical woman who was very concerned about the fate of my eternal soul even after I told her that I am a minister in the United Church of Christ. To be frank, I have been tempted to stop telling people what I do for a living when I fly. On a turbulent stretch of a flight to São Paulo, the quiet Brazilian lady on my left suddenly became very chatty. When she found out that I am a pastor, she reminded me that I should pray for a safe flight. I smiled and assured her that I was praying. Minutes later, when we hit a much worse patch of rough air, the same gentle and soft-spoken lady turned to me with a tinge of anxiety and urgency in her voice and whispered, “***I think it’s time for you to start praying harder.***”

Last month, I knew that I was going to have an interesting overnight flight the moment I fastened my seatbelt. My fellow traveler was double-masked, had a face shield on and, the minute she caught my eye, she thanked me for wearing a well-fitted face mask. Before I could say anything, she volunteered her vaccination status and asked point-blank if I was fully vaccinated. My seatmate had been in the US for a couple of months helping her daughter, who was accepted into a Ph.D. program at Yale, settle into an off-campus apartment, and she was unmistakably upset at vaccine-resistant people whom she blamed for extending the pandemic. After I assured her that I have both shots in my arm and that I had been extra cautious in the days leading up to our

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flight, our conversation took a more serious turn than I had expected. Even before we pulled out of the gate, the woman asked the question I knew was going to come up, “*What kind of work do you do?*” My answer left her speechless for a moment.

Christians, particularly Evangelical pastors, have not received a very positive coverage in the Brazilian media. Unfortunately, historic Protestant denominations are often lumped together with this small but very loud segment of the Christian community that has fused Christianity with nationalism, embraced right-wing conspiratorial theories, denied climate change, and has spread disinformation about face masks and the COVID vaccines. My seatmate, who identified as spiritual but not a churchgoer, expressed relief that I do not fit into her image of pastors and Christians, but she wondered if the world would be better off without churches and religion at all.

There was a palpable sense of helplessness and emotional fatigue in my seatmate’s voice. She told me that she was losing faith in humanity and was worried about the world her children might have to live in. While I listened quietly, she laid the blame on political and religious self-absorption for blinding all of us to the relevance of dialogue and to a collective view of the common good that could inspire humankind to make the effort required to end the pandemic or slow down global warming. Even though she hardly knew me, this woman confessed that she often feels powerless to do anything of substance and significance to change the hearts and minds of people, she believes, cannot be swayed by science, facts, and by the sheer number of human lives lost in this pandemic. It bothered her that pastors and priests have contributed to the hatred, bitterness and misinformation that divide our societies either by their hard-core conservative preaching or by their deliberate silence. She wondered if we are all helplessly stuck in this new age of discord where humankind has become so narcissistic that we have lost sight of our capacity for dialogue, solidarity, friendship, empathy, compassion, and even for cooperation to ensure the future of our species and our planet.

Do you see now why I have second thoughts about telling people on international flights that I am a pastor?

While it was not what I have planned to do on the flight, I am grateful for that intense and difficult conversation foisted on me at 35,000 feet in the air. My seatmate’s sentiments made me more aware of the other times people around me said out loud that they are losing faith in humanity. My own mother expressed similar misgivings about where humankind is headed as scenes of hundreds of Afghans swarming the runway at the airport in Kabul desperately trying to cling on to a U.S. military plane as their very last chance to find safety and freedom from the Taliban streamed into her home. During a special news coverage of the abortion law in Texas, my sister-in-law mentioned that it is hard to keep faith in the goodness of humanity when politicians jump in bed with Evangelicals and conservative Catholics to pass a restrictive abortion bill that not only puts women’s lives at risk but that is also perverse enough to turn neighbor against neighbor. As you know, the new Texas law essentially awards ordinary citizens

\$10,000 dollars if they successfully denounce and sue any clinic or doctor or any woman who makes the difficult decision to have an abortion. To be honest, the same sentiment of loss of faith in our humanity crept into my soul this past week when the FBI warned about potential acts of violence against liberal churches during the far-right rally that gathered in DC yesterday to show support for people who stormed the U.S. Capitol and carried out the infamous attack on our democracy on January 6th. There are times when it is tough to keep the faith in humanity and we wonder if we are doomed to fail.

Sociologist Nicholas Christakis, a professor of Social and Natural Science and director of the Human Nature Lab at Yale University, agrees that we cannot deny that humans, meaning every single one of us here this morning, do have a natural propensity for selfishness, tribalism, violence and even cruelty, but Christakis believes that all of us also have developed an evolutionary capacity to live together and even thrive in community. Evolution has endowed us with the ability to be kind to friends as well as to strangers who are not genetically related to us. We are able to acquire and share knowledge that keeps human civilization from collapsing or disappearing from the face of the Earth. Love and solidarity are encoded in our genes. We are capable of recognizing, celebrating, and protecting the uniqueness of other human beings. Christakis points out that people frequently overlook the evolutionary gift given to us when we recognize the face of a friend in a multitude of faces. We have this amazing ability to create close bonds with other people and recognize each other's distinct identities and individual traits because of our natural tendency to establish and nurture social networks that keep all of us alive. And to live in society, we have been given the extraordinary skill to be good to each other. Prof. Christakis has dedicated his academic life to this idea that our societies and, therefore, every human being, are wired for goodness. We tend to emphasize the brokenness and weakness in human nature, especially amidst the current tumult of our days, but Christakis says that we have to begin to pay more attention to the good features and qualities of our common humanity. We have to be more intentional about cultivating, nurturing and putting to use the goodness that has been given to us.ⁱⁱ We have to teach each other to make human goodness the priority in our lives.

James was right to say that there are two kinds of wisdoms in our world. There is a self-centered wisdom that incites aggression, violence, injustice, inequality, hate and untimely death and there is a heart-enlarging wisdom that opens our eyes and our minds to the potential for goodness in us and others.

In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus confronts the disciples' choice of the self-centered wisdom of the world with a lesson on why they should not cave into the worst inclinations of the human heart but choose instead to practice the heart-enlarging, humbling and peacemaking wisdom the Maker imprinted on every human mind.

This is the second time Jesus talks with his closest friends about his betrayal, suffering, death and resurrection. At Caesarea Philippi, Peter was so upset when Jesus mentioned his passion for the first time that he basically lost it. He pulled Jesus aside

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and told him to stop sounding so depressing and pessimistic. Peter's reaction prompted Jesus to say some of the harshest words he ever said to any of his friends, "***Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.***"ⁱⁱⁱ But after seeing Jesus transfigured on the mount at the beginning of chapter 9 of Mark's Gospel, the disciples are not too keen on asking questions about suffering, death or about Jesus' enigmatic talk about rising again. If nothing else, they are sure that Jesus has the power to lead a successful revolution to overthrow the Romans and to establish a new theocratic Jewish monarchy in Israel. Rather than listening to Jesus, which is exactly what God invited them to do on the Mount of Transfiguration where the divine voice said from the cloud that surrounded Peter, James and John, "***This is my Son, the Beloved; listen to him!***"^{iv} the disciples are bickering about who among them will have the most important roles and positions in the post-revolution and free Israel they were sure Jesus was going to establish.

Aware of his friends' lively dispute and ambitions, Jesus surprises the disciples with a simple question as soon as they get back to their home base in Capernaum. "***What were you arguing about on the way?***" All his followers, even Peter who is known for his big mouth, remain silent. They knew they were still setting their minds on a very self-centered human wisdom. In an attempt to help his followers to put the God-given goodness in them to good use, Jesus reminds them that in a society guided by his heart-enlarging ministry, faith, love and wisdom "***Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all.***"

The Lesson falls flat. Jesus sees the disciples' eyes glazing over as he talked once again about a way of life that his friends probably thought was impossible to practice in the real world. Being a teacher par excellence Jesus knew that to grab his friends' attention he would have to do something dramatic, shocking, unexpected and even a little crazy. So he scoops up a small child into his arms, holds the child on his lap for a while, and when all eyes are turned to the little one, Jesus says something the disciples could hardly believe, "***Whoever welcomes one such child in my name welcomes me, and whoever welcomes me welcomes not me but the one who sent me.***"

I can only imagine what was going on in the disciples' heads: "***Wait! What?***" In first century Palestine, children were at the very bottom of the social heap. For Romans and Jews alike, children embodied the hope for the future. If they lived into adulthood, they would carry the family name, provide for their aging parents, and give birth to the next generation. But in the present, small children were always a burden and a liability. Depending on the age of the child Jesus held in his arms, that child might not be old enough to help with the household chores. And even children who could work were still not fully productive and, for the families, they represented a real financial burden and an extra mouth to feed.

Barbara Lundblad, a professor of Preaching at Union Theological Seminary in New York City, points out that in the Gospel of Mark, children are often very sick,

disabled or possessed by unclean spirits. They are not symbols of innocence like in 21st-century-America, but victims of poverty and disease.^v What the disciples knew about children was that while they were blessings from God, they were also dependent, powerless, vulnerable and barely better than a full-grown slave. It made no sense to them that Jesus would hold up a child as the vision of the heart-enlarging wisdom that brings out the goodness in our nature. But that's exactly what Jesus hoped his disciples, and you and me also, would remember, namely, that our spirituality challenges us to see each other with fresh eyes. Jesus encouraged his closest friends, and you and me also, to create communities where even those who in the present appear to have nothing to contribute, to give, to say that is worth listening to and may be considered a liability have a place at the table. In today's Gospel lesson, Jesus asks the church not to give up hope on humanity. He insists that there is always the potential for goodness not only in us but also in those people we would rather leave outside of our social networks. When he put that little child in the midst of his disciples, Jesus was asking his followers then and now to work on and expand our capacities for empathy and compassion and friendship. Jesus took that little child in his arms to show the people who would become his Church in the world that following him requires an unwavering faith that together and, with God's help, we can imagine a better future for all of us if we have the courage and wisdom to see the inherent worth and goodness of every human being.

“To bring about change, you must not be afraid to take the first step. We will fail when we fail to try.” These words are attributed to Rosa Parks.^{vi} They caught my eyes and my imagination when I stumbled upon them while browsing through a book recently. If we could capture the very core of Jesus' teaching in today's passage, this would be it. Jesus wanted to teach his disciples, his Church, our new members, you and me that to practice the heart-enlarging wisdom of God, we do have to take the first step and reach out to one another trusting that in spite of our history of division and discord we are wired for goodness, and humankind, our present and our future, are worth protecting and saving. We will all fail if the Christian community fails to try to keep alive the faith in our God-given capacity to practice together the heart-enlarging wisdom from above, which, by the grace of God, is already encoded in our DNA.

And for those of us who remain skeptical of this heart-enlarging wisdom that Christ taught the Church, Prof. Nicholas Christakis offered a story.^{vii} In the 1980's, MIT was scanning the brains of Buddhist monks to look at how their disciplined meditations changed their brains. One of the monks was asked during an interview how he kept his inner peace and faith in humankind throughout the day despite all the knocks and slights and bad things that happen to all of us. The monk said that he constantly re-narrated whatever he encountered. He always looked for the good. Someone wanted a more tangible example, so they posed the following scenario. ***“Well since we are in Boston, what if someone cuts you off in traffic?”*** The monk answered, ***“I would imagine that in the backseat of the car, there was a woman delivering a baby. And the husband was driving the car, and he was desperate to get his wife to the hospital because a new life was being born, and, all of a sudden, I wouldn't think of it as being cut off in traffic anymore.”*** Christakis said that if everybody had the

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discipline and attitude of that Buddhist monk, the whole world would be completely different. Christakis believes that seeking to see goodness as you move through your day, not in some kind of Pollyanna-ish way of ignoring all wrongdoing and evil in the world, but making the choice to live without giving into the worst impulses of our humanity and choosing what is good in us and in our society instead of creating more discord, division, hate, hopelessness and despair is the best and the right way to keep intact our faith in our humanity. It all begins with us and our choice to believe and see the goodness in each other.

Jesus never asked his followers to do anything unrealistic or humanly impossible. What he did do was to save them and us from focusing too much on the negative side of our humanity and downplaying what is good. This is why Jesus said that whoever sees the goodness in another human being, even in those human beings we think are below us, worse than us, not good enough to be among us; whoever practices this heart-enlarging wisdom, Jesus said, welcomes him and welcomes the Loving God who sent him.

This is the only way to draw near to God, my friends, by keeping alive the faith in our humanity and letting the heart-enlarging wisdom of God shape our spirituality, our ethics, and our vision for society so we will not fail to try to be good to each other. So go out and make human goodness a priority in your life this week.

May it be so. Amen.

ⁱ Forrest Gump – released in 1994.

ⁱⁱ On Being with Krista Tippett in How We're Wired for Goodness, with Nicholas Christakis, aired on 10 June 2021 [<https://onbeing.org/programs/nicholas-christakis-how-were-wired-for-goodness/>].

ⁱⁱⁱ Mark 8:33.

^{iv} Mark 9:7.

^v Barbara K. Lundblad in Hopeful Fanatic, Day1, 23 September 2012 [https://day1.org/weekly-broadcast/5d9b820ef71918cdf2003217/a_hopeful_fanatic].

^{vi} Suzette Llewellyn, Suzanne Packer with Friends in Still Breathing: 100 Black Voices on Racism, 100 Ways to change the narrative, introduction.

^{vii} On Being with Krista Tippett in How We're Wired for Goodness, with Nicholas Christakis, aired on 10 June 2021 [<https://onbeing.org/programs/nicholas-christakis-how-were-wired-for-goodness/>].