

2.17.19 One Failure Doesn't Mean You're a Failure Acts 13.1-13, 15.36-41

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Acts 13:1-13 (NRSV)

Now in the church at Antioch there were prophets and teachers: **Barnabas**, Simeon who was called Niger, Lucius of Cyrene, Manaen a member of the court of Herod the ruler, and **Saul**. 2 While they were **worshiping the Lord and fasting, the Holy Spirit** said, "*Set apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them.*" 3 Then **after fasting and praying** they laid their hands on them and sent them off.

4 So, being sent out by **the Holy Spirit**, they went down to Seleucia; and from there they sailed to Cyprus. 5 When they arrived at Salamis, they proclaimed the word of God in the synagogues of the Jews. **And they had John also to assist them.** 6 When they had gone through the whole island as far as Paphos, they met a certain magician, a Jewish false prophet, named Bar-Jesus. 7 He was with the proconsul, Sergius Paulus, an intelligent man, who summoned Barnabas and Saul and wanted to hear the word of God. 8 But the magician Elymas (for that is the translation of his name) opposed them and tried to turn the proconsul away from the faith. 9 But Saul, also known as Paul, **filled with the Holy Spirit**, looked intently at him 10 and said, "*You son of the devil, you enemy of all righteousness, full of all deceit and villainy, will you not stop making crooked the straight paths of the Lord? 11 And now listen—the hand of the Lord is against you, and you will be blind for a while, unable to see the sun.*" Immediately mist and darkness came over him, and he went about groping for someone to lead him by the hand. 12 When the proconsul saw what had happened, he believed, for he was astonished at the teaching about the Lord. 13 Then Paul and his companions set sail from Paphos and came to Perga in Pamphylia. **John, however, left them and returned to Jerusalem.**"

At the funeral of former President George Herbert Walker Bush on December 5, 2018, his son George described his dad as someone who served in the Oval Office with dignity and integrity, and said that even in defeat, his father was able to teach his

children lessons. ***“He accepted failure is part of living a full life, but taught us never to be defined by failure. He showed us how setbacks can strengthen.”*** Life is full of failures and disappointments so we might as well be prepared to accept them and learn from them, without being crushed by them. It’s important that we learn that **One Failure Doesn’t Mean You’re a Failure.**

In the passage from Acts 13 we hear about three very important people. Their names are Barnabas, Paul (formerly known as Saul), and John Mark. Barnabas was given the name “Son of Encouragement” by the early Christians because of his generosity of spirit (Acts 4:36). Barnabas was a people-oriented kind of person who was generous with his love, his time and gave of himself to help others. Saul was a very different person than Barnabas. Saul had been persecuting Christians, throwing them in jail, and even approving of mob violence against them. Amazingly, Saul had an experience with the risen Christ that turned his life completely around, but he had a problem. Not a single Christ follower believed that he had changed. No one trusted him. No one wanted anything to do with him. This is the same man who would write more of the New Testament than any other individual so how did that happen? How did he go from being a distrusted outcast and enemy of the church to its most determined advocate and most prolific writer? One person stepped in and put his reputation and self on the line for Saul and opened the doors of trust, belonging, community, and service when no one else would – and that person was...Barnabas (Acts 9:26-28).

Barnabas and Paul made a dynamic duo. Barnabas brought his generosity of spirit, encouragement, and passion for developing people. Saul was task-oriented, driven, hardworking, well-educated, and intense. Both of them were men of prayer who also fasted regularly and sought the guidance of the Holy Spirit. They complemented each other well and God used them greatly. In Acts 13:1, we learn that the church at Antioch had great diversity in its leadership. Named among the prophets and teachers were two black men, Simeon, a Levite from Cyprus, and Lucius, from North Africa, Manaen, a boyhood friend or foster brother of Herod Antipas, as well as Barnabas and Saul. While worshiping and fasting, the people were directed by the Holy Spirit to: “Set

apart for me Barnabas and Saul for the work to which I have called them." So they set out and we're told in an easy to miss phrase at the end of Acts 13:5 that **"they had John also to assist them."**

John who is also known as Mark is a young man who at different points was a companion of the Barnabas, Paul and Peter. In Acts 12:12, we learn that John Mark is the son of a woman named Mary in whose house in Jerusalem Christians from the earliest days met for prayer. It was to this house that Peter went after a miraculous escape from prison (Acts 12:6-18). Later Mark accompanied Paul and Barnabas on a journey from Antioch to Jerusalem with famine relief aid (Acts 12:25). So Mark is a young man who is already connected to some of the most influential leaders in the early church. He seems to be on the fast track to being a key leader himself, but something goes wrong. We're not told the reason why, we don't know if he got sick, scared, if there was a family emergency, if he felt overwhelmed, if there was a disagreement about theology, or strategy, or tactics, but for some reason, Mark quit the mission. He decided to walk away and abandon Barnabas and Saul in the midst of their work for the Lord. I don't need to tell you, but you know I'm going to anyway, that this wasn't good. Quitting, walking away, is rarely the God honoring thing to do. It can sometimes feel like the easier path, but conflicts and disagreements rarely get settled that way and we don't mature as followers of Christ that way either.

We don't know what happened, all we know is (Acts 13:15) **"John left them and returned to Jerusalem."** John Mark had failed. He had the privilege of serving with two of the best leaders in the Jesus movement and he'd let them down and abandoned them. He didn't see the race through to the end. He failed to persevere. I wonder how he felt as he returned to Jerusalem. What was his mental, emotional, and spiritual state? What do you think? When I have failed I know I have to be careful not to get sucked into a negative loop. When we have failed the negative of loop can go something like this: our confidence is shaken and we're less sure of ourself. We become more fearful, afraid, and defensive. We tend to assume the worst – either about ourselves or other people. We are less likely to trust ourselves or others and less likely

to take risks. We can become ashamed and embarrassed. Do you think it's possible that Mark might have been feeling some of those things? What did he say to his mother when he walked back into her house in Jerusalem without Barnabas or Saul? I wonder what his mother said to him.

She was clearly a woman of deep faith and a recognized leader herself. As a parent when our child has failed we feel worse for them than we would if it was our own failure. We'd prefer that it was us. I wonder if Mark's mother Mary looked at her son's head hanging down, his drooping shoulders, and the way he was averting his eyes unable to meet hers for long and knew she had to remind him of some important truths. Maybe she told him again the story about Jesus. How he loved everyone even and especially those that the self-righteous, the powerful, and the rich looked down upon as the losers and the undesirables. How Jesus listened to and talked with all kinds of people and how through his humility and love he enabled so many people to experience forgiveness, redemption, reconciliation, and freedom. How so many people came to Jesus looking and feeling like Mark did at this moment of coming home a failure, yet left his presence with love, hope, and transforming power to live a changed and new life. All that was required was to trust what Jesus said was true and to live it. Even as he was being crucified, Jesus forgave those who were carrying out his execution. Perhaps Mary told her son, if Jesus could forgive that, he certainly can forgive your failures and mine.

While John Mark was back in Jerusalem, Barnabas and Saul spent about a year on their missionary journey and then we get to our next scripture Acts 15:36-41 (NRSV)

36 After some days Paul said to Barnabas, *"Come, let us return and visit the believers in every city where we proclaimed the word of the Lord and see how they are doing."*

37 Barnabas wanted to take with them John called Mark. 38 But Paul decided not to take with them one who had deserted them in Pamphylia and had not accompanied them in the work. 39 The disagreement became so sharp that they parted company; Barnabas took Mark with him and sailed away to Cyprus. 40 But **Paul chose Silas** and set out, the believers commending him to the grace of the Lord. 41 He went through Syria and Cilicia, strengthening the churches."

This brief passage is both sobering and encouraging at the same time. It's sobering because two friends and partners in ministry with the spiritual maturity of Barnabas and Saul can have such a sharp disagreement that they decide to part company. There's part of me that's discouraged by that – it's like the failure of John Mark has multiplied and now it's ruptured a friendship and a ministry team. If spiritual giants like these guys can't get along and resolve their differences what hope is there for the rest of us? Thankfully that's not the end of the story. Remember what I told you about Barnabas and Saul. Barnabas is generous of spirit, people oriented, and he invests in people when other people won't and gives them a chance. Saul – is task oriented, driven, with high expectations of himself and others. The irony of the dispute between Barnabas and Saul is that Saul can't see that what Barnabas wants to offer John Mark is the same opportunity that Barnabas gave Saul – to open the doors of trust, belonging, community, and service. While Saul appreciated that for himself, he didn't have the grace, humility, or love to extend that chance to John Mark.

I imagine Barnabas pleading with Paul saying - Failure is a part of life, even though we wish it weren't, and failure can be very helpful in our growth and development if we learn from it. *"Failure is a detour, not a dead-end street. (Zig Ziglar)"* *"Failure is simply the opportunity to begin again, more intelligently (Henry Ford)."* *"Failure is success if we learn from it. (Malcolm S. Forbes)"* Whatever Barnabas said, he couldn't get Saul to extend to John Mark the same grace he'd welcomed for himself so the two great leaders split up. Paul took Silas with him and set out. Barnabas went and got John Mark and got him back into serving under his gracious leadership. Acts 15:39 is the last mention of John Mark in Acts. You might wonder what happened to him.

Was Paul right to leave him and to think he didn't have the right stuff, that he'd just fail and quit again? I'm happy to tell you that Barnabas was right and Paul was wrong about John Mark. While we never hear about him again in Acts, we do hear about him in several other places in the New Testament. In fact, Paul mentions Mark as one of five Christians who sent greetings to Philemon and some other recipients of that Letter (Philemon 24). If this is the same Mark, and I believe it is, it indicates a later

reconciliation with Paul. Isn't that awesome? Whatever had transpired with Mark that caused him to leave Barnabas and Paul, whatever hard feelings there may have been between Paul and Mark, Barnabas and the Holy Spirit facilitated a beautiful work of reconciliation and grace so that John Mark and Paul were able to serve together effectively. The same five Christians are also among the group that sends greetings to Christians in Colossae, (Colossians 4:10), where Mark is identified as the 'cousin of Barnabas.' I wonder if "cousin of Barnabas" means he's a blood relative or if it's a reference to their close relationship as Barnabas invested in Mark. Mark is also identified by the author of 2 Timothy (4:11) as '*very useful in serving me,*' and as '*my son*' in 1 Peter 5:13. Christian tradition also attributes the Gospel of Mark to the man who took down Peter's account of his experience with Christ.

Here in New England we appreciate a good comeback. Few people have one as good as John Mark. He goes from being on the fast track of Christian leadership development with two of the very best in the early Church – Barnabas and Saul, to the pit of despair after failing and returning to his mother's house. To make matters worse, he likely feels responsible for splitting up the friendship and partnership of Barnabas and Saul. Yet, notice how good God is. God takes the mess created by people and rather than let it divide and hurt the church, God redeems it and turns it into an opportunity for learning and growth. Splitting up Paul and Barnabas for a time leads to two effective teams instead of one. Paul and Silas do great things for God. Barnabas helps encourage and develop John Mark so that he's able to reunite him with Paul who calls him "*very useful,*" and Peter calls him "*my son.*"

One failure doesn't mean you're a failure. When a mistake has been made, we need to humble ourselves, and learn from it. As C.S. Lewis noted, **You can't go back and change the beginning but you can start where you are and change the ending.** If you start where you are today - what can you do to change the ending in a place where you may have experienced failure? How might the Holy Spirit work in and through you if you humble yourself and give the Spirit a chance?

Prayer: Lord give us the courage to fail, for if we have failed, at least we have tried and help us to remember that failure is not an identity, it is merely an event that we can learn and grow from. Help us not to confuse a single defeat with final defeat. Remind us that *“Failure should be our teacher, not our undertaker. Failure is delay, not defeat. It is a temporary detour, not a dead end. Failure is something we can avoid only by saying nothing, doing nothing, and being nothing”* (Denis Waitley). If there exists no possibility of failure, then victory is meaningless (Robert H. Schuller). Often when we think we're at the end of something, we're at the beginning of something else so Lord help us to dare to do great things in your name and may we not be afraid to fail.

Blessing:

Comforted and inspired beyond all fear, Not faltering at God's command,

Learning and increasing from our sorrow God's light illuminating our darkness

Let us boldly and courageously face the future, come what may.

Questions for Discussion or Reflection

1. If you've ever experienced a hard break up or a change in a significant relationship - what made it so difficult? (For example, a first love, children leaving home, retiring, moving, etc.)
2. Do you think you would have sided with Paul or Barnabas in their disagreement concerning whether or not to take John Mark with them on their next missionary journey? Why would you choose that side?
3. Are you more person-oriented (like Barnabas) or task-oriented (like Paul)? What are the pros and cons of your type? What does this show you about God's use of various types of people?
4. How do you think John Mark felt about deserting Paul and Barnabas on their first missionary journey and then learning he was the cause of a breakup between two of the most significant leaders in the Jesus movement?

5. How would you describe your attitude toward and feelings about failure?
Reflecting on your life can you recall a time you didn't respond well to failure and a time that you did? What made the difference?
6. How would you advise someone younger than you to view and respond to failure so that it is motivating rather than destructive? What difference does faith make in how we cope with failure?