

Chris Currie
Sermon: Knocked Down and Get Up Again
Text: Philippians 2:1-13
October 8, 2023

Philippians 3:4-14

If anyone else has reason to be confident in the flesh, I have more: ⁵ circumcised on the eighth day, a member of the people of Israel, of the tribe of Benjamin, a Hebrew born of Hebrews; as to the law, a Pharisee; ⁶ as to zeal, a persecutor of the church; as to righteousness under the law, blameless.

⁷ Yet whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ. ⁸ More than that, I regard everything as loss because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord. For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things, and I regard them as rubbish, in order that I may gain Christ ⁹ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law but one that comes through faith in Christ, ^[a] the righteousness from God based on faith. ¹⁰ I want to know Christ ^[b] and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death, ¹¹ if somehow I may attain the resurrection from the dead.

¹² Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal, ^[c] but I press on to lay hold of that for which Christ ^[d] has laid hold of me. ¹³ Brothers and sisters, I do not consider that I have laid hold ^[e] of it, but one thing I have laid hold of: forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, ¹⁴ I press on toward the goal, toward the prize of the heavenly ^[f] call of God in Christ Jesus.

The danger of the overachiever and the perfectionist, whether we are talking about people or the overachiever church, is that we live with a fear of failure rather than a fear of security, protection, and tranquility. Because we stigmatize failure, because we look at those who take big risks but end up on the losing end, because we do not build failure into how we parent or teach or participate in the community of faith, because we reduce it all to success, winning at all costs, and high achieving, then there are also fewer opportunities for growth, for learning, for God to do something where all we could see were dead-ends, dead lives, and lost causes. In this passage from Philippians, the apostle Paul points us not to his resume as the overachieving Israelite, circumcised on the 8th day, in the right tribe, a legal expert, and righteous as righteous could possibly be under the law. In

terms of worth and righteousness, Paul is about as close to a religious success as one can get. However, Paul tells us, righteousness is not really about risk management and running out the clock and just trying not to mess up.

When he was in high school, my dad went on the college tour with his older sister to the University of Texas and while she was taking the tour he found a college student to play ping pong in the student union. Trying to strike up a conversation and play it cool with the college student, he asked him if he had made the Dean's list as a student there. The college student replied, 'Look, kid, I stay out of trouble.' Following Jesus Christ is not so much about just staying out of trouble and failure avoidance, in fact, sometimes the path of discipleship can lead right into trouble and the 'best laid plans that oft go awry.'

Alice and William Bloomfield, the couple whose gifts and resources built the sanctuary we are in right now, lost their first child in childbirth and their second child, Anna Henry, to diphtheria while she was a student at Newcomb College. Don Frampton writes that 'their grief over her death was so profound, so immense that it drove them into seclusion. But the new church project became like a surrogate child, drawing them back into daily life.'¹ The life they found in this community of faith, the life they found here in the midst of tragedy, grief, and the personal defeat of losing both daughters, resurrected them when like Abraham and Sarah, they thought their lives were meant to be barren and fruitless. In a way, all of us sitting here now are the children of Alice and William Bloomfield. In 1923, Alice Bloomfield made a gift in the amount of \$160,000, \$2.3 million in today's dollars, nearly the size of our annual church budget, to build this sanctuary, and this couple's hurt, pain, and grief, led, not to an escape from this world, but a birth of a church that would baptize thousands of children and call them to a life of discipleship in service to Jesus Christ. From whence did the Bloomfield's generosity come? It wasn't because they had easy lives and one religious high after another in their life of faith, but this deep well of generosity came after being knocked down by grief, by tragedy, by immense personal suffering. It was from that emptiness, that God made something beautiful happen. It was in the midst of the mess of their lives, where they closed their hearts and their doors and tried to wall them off forever, that the Spirit did a new thing, letting a mini-resurrection occur, that enabled the Bloomfields see that their lives were not over after all, but had been given a new purpose. As long as there is a worshipping community in this place, we will all be children of the Bloomfields.

¹ Don Frampton, 'Welcome Corner,' 11.

That is what God does. Making something happen in the mist of an empty void, a deep darkness, a black hole. This is what God does, caring less about what our resume looks like, and more about what resurrected lives might look like; lives that are knocked down and then by miracle, get back up again. This is what God does. Giving the Bloomfields a whole collection of surrogate children in the aftermath of the loss of their own. By the way, I hope you are aware that today is Stewardship Dedication Sunday, when we commit our gifts and our own resources and money to the ministry of this church. During my early years of 'adulting,' I made a pledge to the church and it ended up a failure. I made the commitment full of hope and anticipation, and even though I had grown up in the church, I really didn't know how a pledge worked. I put money in the offering plate when I could, wrote some checks here and there, and then at the end of the year I got a statement on my gift and did not realize I was supposed to put my name to the money I was giving and I was short of what I thought I could do anyway. I failed. I did not meet the pledge I made to the church. I was embarrassed. But no one called me out either. No one shamed me. No one read me the riot act. Instead the church continued to love me, would one day send me to seminary and gift me with scholarships for graduate school, and found ways to continue to encourage me to use my time and other gifts. The next year, I made a more realistic pledge that I kept track of and could make sure I could fulfill for the coming year. Failure became a central part of the learning process, failure became a central part of faith, failure became a central part of the Christian community. Failure made it possible for real growth to occur, failure made it possible for God to do something new, failure made it possible to get up again after getting knocked down.

Perhaps one of my most humbling moments and biggest personal failures occurred fifteen years ago. I was certain I was called to pursue a Ph.D. in Theology, and that teaching and scholarship were part of my pastoral vocation. So in 2008, I took the GRE and spent the fall applying to the best programs in theology across the United States. I did not know it at the time, but it did not help that I was applying in the midst of the Great Recession when graduate admissions were cut in half in most institutions of higher learning, but nevertheless, I was confident that I would find the right program. Thankfully, today, the process is handled by email which makes it more like ripping the band-aid off quickly, but in my case it was more like being wounded by a slow march of paper cuts. In most of the country besides New Orleans, February is a cold gray cheerless season and I remember trudging to the mailbox day after day and opening letter after letter from admissions office after

admissions office and trying to compose myself to read, 'Dear Mr. Currie, Thank you for your application. We had many worthy applicants, but unfortunately...' And I would not have to read any further. I knew what the rest of the letter said already. And in that cold, grey, February, I experienced a perfect shut-out. Oh-For. I was not accepted anywhere. I was rejected everywhere. In my mind, I was laid low. Discouraged. Shaken. Unsure of my abilities and feeling sorry for myself. A professor I had recommended looking at universities and divinity schools in the UK, but such a possibility seemed too far fetched and unlikely, out of the way and complicated. But just over a year later, our family of five were on our way to Edinburgh, to spend the next three years there. And it worked out better than if I had just gotten what I wanted. The God who is unafraid to assume human flesh, the God who is unafraid to become something small and unafraid to become what we consider irrelevant, the God who is unafraid to encounter suffering and risk and failure, this God is also unafraid to use our failure, our struggles, and our low moments, to create resurrection, to bring about re-birth, to help us get up again after getting knocked down.

In writer Rachel Held Evans words, 'it's just death and resurrection, over and over again, day after day, as God reaches down into our deepest graves, [our biggest failures, our messiest brokenness], and with the same power that raised Jesus from the dead, wrests us from our pride, our apathy, our fear, our prejudice, our anger, our hurt, and our despair. Most days I don't know which is harder for me to believe: that God reanimated the brain functions of a man three days dead, or that God can bring back to life all the beautiful things we have killed. Both seem pretty unlikely to me.'² And yet the God of resurrection is also a God who knows a thing or two about failure, dead-ends, pain and suffering and death. And yet, this God, in Frederick Buechner's words, refuses to ever let the worst thing be the last thing. We might as well trust God to do something miraculous, after all, Rachel Held Evans reminds us, God 'knows a thing or two about the way out of the grave.'³ In the name of the Father and Son and the Holy Spirit. Amen.

² Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, 21.

³ Rachel Held Evans, *Searching for Sunday*, 229.