FIRST PRESBYTERIAN
Ann Arbor | Michigan

A Thousand Small Changes

July 4, 2021
Seventh Sunday after Pentecost

The Reverend Jay Sanderford, Associate Pastor

Mark 6: 1-13
2 Corinthians 12: 2-10

One October a decade ago, the Nobel Committee awarded Dr. Robert Lefkowitz, physician and biochemist, for solving a wicked problem. For decades, biologists and chemists struggled to understand the nature and function of G protein-coupled receptors, which are essential components of the cell membrane. They could tell that these receptors were integrally involved in the cell's communication with the rest of the body, and that understanding them completely would open up exciting new medical advances. If, for instance you take a beta blocker to relieve hypertension or an antihistamine to control your seasonal allergies, you can thank Dr. Lefkowitz.[1]

But his success did not come easily. It was extremely difficult to understand how the receptor cells worked because of a variety of chemical factors that were taking place simultaneously on a microscopic level. How do you go about solving such a wicked problem? Eventually, Lefkowitz and his team discovered a strategy for finding the solution, and it won them the Noble prize in chemistry.

What it all boils down to, according to Lefkowitz, is a single word: chutzpah. Or Yiddish for the audacity to conduct research on some of the most challenging problems in biochemistry. "I have no idea whether I can solve them."[2]

What he does have is a methodology to match his audacious approach to research: Think big, really big, experiment, expect failure, learn from failure. Experiment again, fail again.

There is something about failure that we find interesting, perhaps even encouraging.

Perhaps that's what makes Mark's story of Jesus returning home to meet blunt rejection so interesting. Spotting failure in great people is something we find fascinating. Mind you, we bear no morose desire to see people fail. It's instead the irony of seeing people who are accomplished in many things fail outrageously in others. We marvel at the inner strength that moves people forward despite their failures.

[1] L. Gregory Jones and Nathan Jones. "Success as the Byproduct of Repeated Failure." Faith and Leadership, Duke Divinity School. December 3, 2012.

[2] Ibid

When Walter Issacson published his massive biography of Albert Einstein, I was disappointed when he refuted the oft-repeated story that the great physicist had failed math class early in his education. The story, repeated in scores of books and articles as a way of reassuring underachieving math students (like me!), was simply untrue. According to Issacson, when a rabbi in Princeton told Einstein that the story had again been repeated in a popular newspaper column, Einstein chuckled and assured the rabbi that before he had turned 15 he had mastered differential and integral calculus.[3]

When we match ourselves to great people, they often seem more like us in their failures than in their successes. We glean encouragement from their setbacks. Their genius may prompt us to marvel and question why so few people appear so much more gifted than the many. And their failures, on any scale, fill us with a sense of hope, courage and even redemption. All is not lost when we fail.

A storyline of the New Testament is that Jesus is rejected by his own people. He fails to work wonders among those friends and family who know and love him best. Rejection by anyone fosters powerful emotions, but rejection is all the more painful when it comes at the hands of family and friends. It was Mark who noted quite candidly that Jesus "was amazed at [the] unbelief" (Mark 6:6) of the people in the town where he was raised. Because of this level of rejection, says Mark, Jesus could do no deeds of power there in Nazareth, except that he laid hands on a handful of sick people and cured them. And in failing so spectacularly and openly, Jesus shows his disciples how he survives a fall from the heights of the rock-star bandwagon, picks himself up, dusts himself off and goes back to work. Maybe his twelve disciples will learn by example how to take their lumps and get back in the game.

Think big, experiment, expect failure, learn from failure. Experiment again, fail again.

As Jesus gets ready for his next phase of ministry, he prepares his twelve disciples to go out into the countryside, into the world, his experience of rejection and failure tempers his instructions to his disciples. He knows well the wall of resistance that awaits every message-bearer of the Gospel news and the steady diet of scorn that will be served up to those who speak up for God's mercy, justice and welcome. Along with urging them to travel lightly, and challenging them to go out beyond the village gates and to heal the sick and to cast out demons, he gives them a liturgical ritual of failure when their efforts fall flat and their message of acceptance is rejected: *"If any place will not welcome you and they refuse to hear you, as you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them"* (Mark 6:11).

But it's not only what this ritual does to the townspeople; it's also what it does for the disciples: it brings closure to a failed initiative and permission to move on. The people of God are not to waste their resources or time agonizing when things don't go as planned. This liturgical ritual is not an easy excuse for those who want to jump ship at the first sign of difficulty and disagreement. It is a symbolic act, to be repeated as necessary to help us go on with our work in the world in spite of failure and disappointment. It is not a way out but a way forward. It's not how to stop doing something; it's how to continue doing it but under different circumstances.

---

[3] Walter Issacson, Einstein: His Life and Universe, (New York, Simon & Schuster; April 10, 2007)

We are not to be stopped by failure and rejection, but we should find a way to close that chapter and start a new one—more determined than ever to continue on.

People, church leaders, are anxious for their future. Like Jesus' disciples in Mark they have been sent out into the new post-pandemic world with very few tools. And disruption and change are hard. The pandemic has reduced our confidence and crushed our resilience and there is no clear, guaranteed path to success, especially for congregations like ours that cherish the questions more than the answers.[4]

Then I remember Jesus' formula from Mark: Think big, experiment, expect failure, learn from failure. Experiment again, fail again.

Maybe there are other people and places we can learn from in this time of transition.

Another scientist. Alison Sweeney, a Professor of Ecology and Evolutionary Biology (EEB) at Yale University points to a possible blueprint for a better world and maybe a better church. Her lab focuses on "the evolution of biological soft matter and the mechanisms by which they assembled themselves over time." Sweeney says that understanding these mechanisms may offer the means for creating new biofuels, chemicals, and materials that help sustain planet Earth. I cannot do the article justice, let alone Professor Sweeney's research, but I want to share what she says about giant clams and organisms and organizations that are continually evolving:

> *EEB brings with it a very specific wealth of knowledge about animal diversity. In my lab, we study giant clams, and although we tend to talk about them as a composite animal, there are seven to 10 species of giant clams. Each of them has its own subtleties and nuances of where they like to live and what they look like.*
>
> *We're working on a paper now that makes a strong claim that giant clams are the most efficient solar energy system on Earth. By that I mean giant clams take in the greatest fraction of sunlight and convert it into chemical energy. We can compare it to any other system, from tropical rainforests to cornfields in Iowa. The thing that comes closest is the boreal spruce forests…*
>
> *It has to do with the way light scatters from spherical particles onto vertical surfaces. What both the giant clam and the spruce forests have discovered is that you can physically absorb a lot more sunlight*

[4] Sarai Rice, "A Thousand Tiny Changes," Congregational Consulting Group, May 17, 2021.

if your absorbing surfaces are parallel to the incoming light rather than perpendicular to them. And then you have to spread that light out over the vertical surfaces. Clams and spruce forests both have these vertical pillars and a mechanism to redistribute and wrap light around them.[5]

What if churches are like giant clams? Constantly evolving, experimenting with ways we can go out into the world and scatter the light of God in our community, and around the world.

Like clams, churches are evolutionary organisms—the result of endless tiny changes over a long time that have allowed them to thrive in a particular environment. And to learn from Sweeney's research, the church's best chance for success may be to continue to evolve as the environment changes—not always by asking big questions or adopting big strategic goals but by continuing to spin off many tiny changes week-in, week out.

Experiment, expect failure, learn from failure. Experiment again, fail again. Go out into the community, try acts of justice and compassion, speak truth to power, build a house, serve food to hungry people. You don't need a whole lot of tools, or tricks or resources, just go and do! Find creative ways to make you surfaces reflect the love of God. Keep evolving!

I could easily be wrong. Perhaps there is another Martin Luther or Martin Luther King Jr. on the church's horizon, poised to post another 95 theses or reveal another dream. Maybe another Rosa Parks or Darnella Frazier is on the loose. But as Adam Gopnik says in his book *A Thousand Small Sanities*, "Whenever we look at how the big problems get solved, it was rarely a big idea that solved them. It was the intercession of a thousand small sanities."[6]

The church of the future may emerge, not from a single big idea, but from the collected wisdom of "an infinity of small effects" initiated over time. There is a time crunch, of course—a species that does not evolve fast enough may not survive. But the truly elegant solution, the one filled with iridescent, light-catching crystals like those of the giant clam, may be the one that emerges slowly as we create a thousand small new ways to reflect the light of God come to the world in Jesus Christ.

The Reverend Jay Sanderford, Associate Pastor

[5] Jim Shelton, YaleNews, "Giant Clams, Pollen and Squid Eyes—Blueprints for a Better World," April 26, 2021.

[6] Adam Gopnik, A Thousand Small Sanities: The Moral Adventure of Liberalism, (Basic Books, New York, 2019), p.227.