

John Mark: The Failure Who Made Good

Acts 13:1-5, 15:36-41; Colosians 4:10-11; 2 Timothy 4:6-15

Unsung Heroes and Heroines of the Faith

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Tom Tewell, the pastor of The Fifth Avenue Presbyterian Church in New York, tells the story of a deserted house in Badgely, Pennsylvania. If you peered through the windows of that house you would see that the floors were never finished, the carpets were never installed, the cabinets and fixtures were never put in. And you would see a CONDEMNED sign nailed to the front door. Here's the story. Years ago a family started building their dream home. But along the way they ran into financial difficulties, so they instructed the contractor to use inferior materials. One night, during a severe storm, a huge crack appeared in the dining room wall. When the contractor arrived the next morning he spotted the crack and then found similar cracks all through the house. So he had to report to the building inspector that the house was unstable; it was full of cracks. The building inspector then had no recourse but to post the CONDEMNED sign on the front door. In Badgely it is known as the house that never became a home.

You may feel like a human that never became a person, a real, undivided, fully alive, person. You look great on the outside, but if folks could peer through your windows they would spot the cracks in the foundation and walls of your life. You've been using inferior building materials, and now you're afraid that God, the Great Inspector in the sky, will tack a CODEMNED sign on your soul.

But humans are not houses. And John Mark is living proof that God doesn't bulldoze people who fail. John Mark has three things to tell us today. First, failure is a fact of life. Of every life. The most successful person sitting in this sanctuary has failed, and failed again and then again and again. We have failed, if not in our commitment to family, or in our performance at work, or in our obligation to friends, then certainly in our devotion to God.

John Mark signed on to accompany Paul and Barnabas on their first mission trip. And I have no doubt that he was highly motivated. He was young, full of energy, and eager to serve. But before the trip was half over he turned tail and headed for home. We're not told why. Perhaps the work was more than he bargained for. Perhaps he was afraid of the bandits who hijacked unwary travelers. Perhaps he was just homesick. But when Acts 15 says that John Mark "deserted" them, the Greek word is "apostanta" from which we get our English word "apostate." So there's no weaseling out of it, there is no other word for it; John Mark was a failure, pure and simple.

Last Thursday Carol and I toured the Winston Churchill exhibit at the Library of Congress. It was a stirring reminder that when Adolph Hitler seemed invincible, when the Luftwaffe was reducing Britain's cities to rubble, it was Churchill's speeches that rekindled the courage of the British people and spurred them on to victory. But that was the Second World War. During the First World War Churchill made a tragic blunder. While serving as First Lord of the Admiralty he sent the British fleet to seize the Dardanelles, the all-important sea route from the Mediterranean to the Black Sea. The campaign was an appalling failure. There were thousands of casualties, and before the war was over Churchill resigned his office and joined the army in the trenches in France. Like John Mark and like you and me at times, Churchill was a failure, pure and simple.

He then discovered what John Mark also discovered: some people will never let you forget your failures. In the 1930s, Churchill was a political cast-off. When William Manchester wrote about those years in Churchill's life he entitled the book "Alone." No one forgave him, no one trusted him, no positions were offered him. They would not let him forget his failure.

Similarly, when Paul and Barnabas got together to plan their second mission trip, Paul adamantly refused to take John Mark with them. I can hear him saying to Barnabas, "Look, he blew it in Pamphylia and I'm not taking another chance on him. Once a coward, always a coward." Paul would not let John Mark forget

his failure.

Evidently Paul had forgotten all about his own failures. Think about Paul's record for a moment. Before he met Christ, Paul was a leading figure in the anti-Jesus movement. According to Acts 9 he was "breathing threats and murder against the disciples of the Lord."² He held the coats of those who stoned Stephen. Just before his conversion he got permission to arrest both male and female believers in Damascus, and drag them back to Jerusalem for trial. Of course, when he converted to Christ, he confessed how terribly wrong he had been. "I am the foremost of sinners,"² he told his young associate, Timothy. But when it came to forgiving John Mark for his sins, Paul had a short memory.

In my experience, it is often people who have the most to hide who are the most unforgiving of others. When I hear someone lambasting the president or some other public figure, I wonder what they are concealing about themselves. So if someone out there refuses to forgive you, understand that it may be more their problem than yours. Because an unforgiving spirit often hides an unconfessed sin.

Here's the third thing John Mark has to tell us: In spite of our failures, God wants us to succeed. So there is Barnabas standing toe to toe with Paul, arguing vociferously that John Mark deserves another chance. And when Paul categorically refuses, Barnabas takes John Mark under his wing and they sail off to Cyprus for another go at missionary work. Years pass, and suddenly Paul writes this to the Colossian church, "Mark, the cousin of Barnabas . . . (has) been a comfort to me." (Colossians 4:10-11) And in his last letter to Timothy Paul writes, "Get Mark and bring him with you; for he is very useful in serving me." (2 Timothy 4:11) What happened? Why did Paul change his mind about John Mark? All we can guess is that Barnabas believed so firmly in John Mark's potential that John Mark came to believe in his own potential and to act on it. And out of his failure came such a string of successes that even Paul sings his praises and wants his company.

Sir John Gielgud died recently at the age of 96 following an illustrious acting career that took him from Hamlet to Hollywood. Gielgud relished taking on the darker roles. Here's what he said about Iago and Richard III: "One is always trying to find the other side of a character, some human trait. You must try to understand why he does what he does." That is how Barnabas treated John Mark. A deserter? Yes. A failure? Yes. But he also saw the potential on the other side of his character. So Barnabas, in the name of the forgiving God, persuaded John Mark to try again, and John Mark the failure, made good.

Oh, by the way, John Mark's greatest success is a book you've probably read. It's called "The Gospel according to Mark," the second book in the New Testament, and the first of the four gospels to be written. We would not have that gospel had John Mark internalized what Paul said about him. There would be only three gospels had he let failure wrap him up in a straightjacket.

Don't let your failures straightjacket you! God loves you, God believes in you, God forgives you, God has a great future for you. So lift up your head, square your shoulders, and step into the future unafraid. Some unfinished task, perhaps some great work is waiting, and only you can get it done.