

Get Used to Disappointment
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John 16:25-33 NRSV

Introduction

Last week we celebrated Easter, and we will continue to celebrate in our hymns as we did today. But in the sermon title the word *disappointment* appears! If there is to be a sermon on disappointment, it would seem to be more appropriate before Easter than after. Certainly, what we call Good Friday had to be the greatest day of disappointment in the history of the world, and Easter the day most opposite to disappointment. It seems we should now move on to things more positive. Jesus is risen! The Holy Spirit has been given! The church is in action, equipped to do its mission!

I can't really speak to the timing of today's sermon, only that I thought perhaps a further reflection on disappointment might be of some value for us. Since the early followers of Jesus experienced disappointment even after Easter, we shouldn't be surprised if we do as well.

Disappointment is a special kind of bad news. It comes from a situation when we are expecting something good, or perhaps we think we have the right to something good. We all experience and have experienced disappointment of various kinds. Some of these are trivial, and others deeply wound us, scar us, and leave us emotionally gasping for air.

The title of today's sermon comes from a fairy tale movie called "The Princess Bride." If you've seen the film, you may have spotted that already. A character named Inigo Montoya has spent the last twenty years becoming the best swordsman he possibly can. He has done this in order to take revenge on a man who killed his father. He now meets a man whose skill in swordsmanship is even greater than his own. He demands to know who he is, but the man simply responds, "Get used to disappointment."

PRINCESS BRIDE CLIP

Inigo: Who are you?

Man: No one of consequence.

Inigo: I must know!

Man: Get used to disappointment.

Sometimes our disappointments are, at least in retrospect, a bit inconsequential. Like Inigo wanting to know the identity of the man in black. Grade school is a great place for disappointment, like when two kids are choosing kick ball teams and we are the last one picked, or the teacher asks a question, and you know the answer, but the teacher picks someone else. In this next scene, the ogre Shrek finds his land overrun by fairy-tale creatures who have been expelled there by Lord Farquaad. Shrek wants to find Farquaad to discuss the matter, but he needs help to find him. So he asks:

SHREK CLIP

Shrek: Does anyone know how to find him?

Donkey: Oh, I do! I know where he is!

Shrek: Does anyone ELSE know where to find him?

(Creatures avoid volunteering) Anyone at all?

Donkey: Me, me! Pick me! Pick me!

But we are not always chosen.

So, sometimes our disappointments are something trivial, something we can laugh at later. Helping children deal with disappointment is one of the inescapable duties of being a parent. You don't always get what you want, we tell them. That's the way life is. Get used to disappointment. Life will be more tolerable if you do. But disappointment is not always trivial. It can go very deep, even to what we sense is the core of ourselves. How much have we all needed to swallow our shocking sadness, when something deeply important to us fails to happen or is taken away from us?

It is possible that something has come to your mind just now, either because it is a recent disappointment or because, regardless of how long ago, it reflects a pain that refuses to heal. Our world is broken, in a whole variety of ways. And most concerning, we humans as God's crown of creation are broken as well. People disappoint us, and if we are honest, we know that we also disappoint others. Sometimes these disappointments motivate us to react in ways designed to protect ourselves. We decide we won't allow ourselves to be vulnerable anymore. We will absolutely avoid having to rely on other people. In this process, we may even begin to wonder whether God might also let us down.

Jesus and Disappointment

On the matter of disappointment, like any other issue, we do well to explore the life and teachings of Jesus. Was Jesus ever disappointed? It's pretty easy to spot situations that qualify as disappointment for Jesus. One time he was hungry and approached a fig tree, but it had no figs. Jesus was not happy about that, and Matthew 21 and Mark 11 say that he cursed the tree! In Luke 13 Jesus tells a story about a man who planted a fig tree that failed to yield fruit. He decides to give it another year, but announces that if he's still disappointed a year later, he will cut the tree down. These stories suggest that God is sometimes disappointed with people and holds them accountable. One such example is that Jesus was disappointed with Peter when he denied three times that he knew Jesus. Isn't it interesting and encouraging that Jesus did not give up on Peter but reinstated him? And Peter went on to become a great missionary.

So yes, Jesus was disappointed sometimes. To flip the question around, was anyone ever disappointed with Jesus? The simple answer is "constantly." Though his heavenly father was "well pleased" with him, to virtually everyone else he was a disappointment—he simply didn't match up with what they were expecting, or not consistently.

To reflect a bit on these matters, we should be humble when we fail like Peter, but we need to be reminded that even when we are pleasing to God, a whole variety of people may be disappointed in us.

Let's move now to what Jesus had to say about disappointment. And here I wish to use the text that was read for us earlier—John 16:25-33—and particularly verse 33. This comes from the upper room section of the Gospel of John when, just before his arrest and crucifixion, Jesus is giving final instructions to his closest disciples and friends. He announces that he is leaving, he warns that there are hard things to come. Yet he also has some good news about the Holy Spirit who will empower and equip them, individually and together, to carry out the mission of God's kingdom. He tells them in verse 33 that "I have said [these things] to you, so that in me you may have peace. In the world you face persecution. But take courage; I have conquered the world!" There is a lot to reflect on in verse 33. Let's take a look.

First, he has just given them important information so that they may have peace. The word translated peace is the term *eirene* in Greek, translating the word *shalom* in Hebrew—a small yet massive word that means all the good things that God intends to give, both individually and together: good relationships, success in their endeavors, calmness and assurance that things will be okay, among many others. This is Jesus’ goal here—to teach them what they need to have shalom. The reference in verse 33 to “this” that Jesus said to them, more literally “things” (plural), probably indicates verses 26 and 27 where he assured them that (quote) “The Father loves you” and that they can ask for things in Jesus’ name.

Second, in contrast to being *in Jesus* is being *in the world* (that is, our earthly context in this life); we can be in both at the same time; in Jesus we can have shalom, but in the world, we will face *persecution*, according to the NRSV. The Greek word translated *persecution* is *thlipsis*—say that seven times really fast, and bring a towel. *Thlipsis! Thlipsis!*

The NRSV is correct that *thlipsis* can mean persecution, but this word is broader than that. It can mean trouble and problems of several kinds. It is used twice in the Gospel of John. The other time is just a few verses previous in this same chapter, verse 21, where it refers to the anguish of a woman in childbirth. This is a very specific kind of pain or hardship. And the word can also be used in a very general way to refer to all kinds of distresses, such as in 2 Cor 8:13 and James 1:27. And I believe Jesus intends that more general sense here—not to exclude persecution, but to include more than that. I propose that disappointment is a kind of *thlipsis*, a kind of trouble. So for our purposes, I wish to translate part of verse 33 like this: “In the world you have disappointment and other troubles.”

Third, Jesus tells us to “take courage.” The Greek here is translated very well. It’s like Jesus is saying, Cheer up. Don’t be discouraged. And the reason he can say this is because of what he’s going to say next.

Jesus says: I have conquered the world! Here we have the word *world* again, the second time here in verse 33. From John 3:16 we know that God loves the world. But if the world is something that is conquered by Jesus, we now realize that it is something, or someone, or some group of people, in opposition to Jesus. There is contention going on, a kind of battle.

The good news is that Jesus has already won that battle. And we participate in this victory, as Paul says in 1 Cor 15:57: “Thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.” How might we live differently if we believed this? Paul instructs us in Rom 12:21 to conquer evil with good (cf. 1 John 5:4).

Back to John chapter 16—verse 33 can be translated, then: **I have said these things to you so that in me you may have shalom. In the world you will have disappointment and other troubles. But take courage. I have conquered the world!**

Disappointments

So what are some of the disappointments we face? Sometimes to be disappointed can help to make us a better person. When we learn that we need to share our toys. When we learn that we can't always have what we want right away. We can start to learn contentment. And we all know the difficulty of dealing with someone who has not learned to accept such kinds of disappointment, whether a child or an adult. One version of this is called entitlement. It makes people snarly and hard to get along with.

When the ice cream store doesn't have our favorite flavor today.

When the movie we were excited to see turns out to be a flop.

When students wrongly think they deserve a better grade.

When the power goes out and ruins our evening.

When the event we were so eager to enjoy gets rained out or otherwise canceled.

When our team does not win and loses its best player to an injury.

In the world you will have disappointment and other troubles. But take courage. I have conquered the world!

For other things it is harder to trust and be content:

When the job we applied for is given to someone else.

When the school we applied to, turns us down.

When there seems to be too much month at the end of the money.

When our crops need rain and we don't get it, or get hail instead.

In the world you will have disappointment and other troubles. But take courage. I have conquered the world!

And some situations are much, much harder yet:

When the friendship or perhaps marriage we wanted doesn't happen.

When our health is threatened or taken away.

When we have family problems of various kinds.

When we lose someone close to us through abandonment or death.

In some cases, this is hard even when we know it is something we should simply accept.

A couple weeks ago, Aleen and I attended a funeral of a former student. She was a strong Christian believer and there was much to celebrate about her life, even though her health issues had taken her at too young an age. But it was mentioned more than once during that service that she was very much hurt when her mother passed away some years previously.

Now this person knew, I'm sure, that her mother was going to die one day and likely before she herself would die. Yet the loss was extremely hard to bear. And so it is with us. There are disappointments with a capital "D" or in ALL CAPITAL LETTERS.

In the world you will have disappointment and other troubles. But take courage. I have conquered the world!

And sometimes we or those we love are victims of injustice, or war, or abuse, or other violence. When someone deliberately mistreats us. And let me be clear that the way to respond in such situations is often much more complicated than simply accepting what has happened. Mennonites in the Ukraine today are wrestling with how to follow Jesus in a time of war and violence. Even in such cases, our response must begin with what Jesus says here:

In the world you will have disappointment and other troubles. But take courage. I have conquered the world!

As in other ways, Jesus is our model: when he felt abandoned by God in his suffering, he cried out but remained faithful, and was delivered through death (Matt 27–28; Rom 8:18–24). It was as he anticipated the torture of the cross that Jesus said to his closest disciples, “I have said these things to you, so that in me you may have shalom. In the world you have disappointment and other troubles. But take courage; I have conquered the world!” (John 16:33). Jesus was telling them to prepare for disappointment and other problems, including persecution. But as they faced those realities, they could have confidence, could take courage, because Jesus had already overcome and conquered the world.

Conclusion

When Jesus tells us to get used to disappointment, he is not telling us to be cynical. Being cynical is for those who, yes, are disappointed but who also have given up hope that it will come out right in the end. Jesus calls us to take up a cross and follow him. And like Jesus we need to learn to cry out to God in lament when the hard things happen. Some things will be made right in the present, and some will be made right later.

But hard things are not the whole story. Those who lose their lives for his sake will gain them back again. There are so many good gifts that God gives us, both in this life as well as in the next. And we can nurture gratitude in ourselves and in others for these gifts. These are not something that God owes us, but something that God rejoices to give to us.

So we can embrace the good with the hard. With the disappointments we also expect and are grateful for the joys! For we are conquerors with our Lord Jesus Christ, even if we sometimes hardly feel like such. Jesus will return, and will make all things new, and will wipe away the tears from our eyes. In whatever time he chooses to do so. The pattern of Easter is that we go through hardship to joy on the other side.

Jesus has conquered the world, the one who said, “I am the good shepherd. . . . The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they—that we—may have life, and have it abundantly.” (John 10:11, 10)