

The Life of a Faithful Failure
John 21:1-19

Last week I went hiking at Lory State Park.
It was a beautiful, breezy spring day;
it almost seemed like I'd stepped into an idyllic moment of grace – I felt one with the Divine.
Such shining moments inspire me, keep me energized on this journey through life.

I was so happy, gulping crisp air into my winter-lazy lungs, that I thought I could
notice every rose-colored stone, each early butterfly and bee,
the stream racing downhill, having just recently escaped the icy grasp of deep freeze.
I noticed gentle sun on the southern slopes,
and patches of snow crouching under north-facing shade.
I noticed that, even hiding in the dark,
the drifts were losing ground, melting onto the path.
I noticed the path –
becoming muddier as I trekked through snowmelt.
And I noticed my shoes,
how the tread seemed to suck at the mud,
catching it, holding it,
so it wouldn't have a choice but to come home with me.
And just as I began to notice my transition from
enjoyment of the moment into
annoyance at having to scrape dried dirt later,
my hiking companion broke the silence
with delighted awe: "the mud sparkles!"

I hadn't noticed.

I'd seen the melting snow trickling onto my path and
making a muddy mess that I'd eventually have to clean up –
but I hadn't seen the mud itself,
shimmering and dancing with sunlight;
rays reflected from countless tiny *mineral* flecks.
It was gorgeous.

I reached down to try to pick up a fragment of that light
and realized there was *no way* to separate the shimmer from the mud.

A blotch of muck
infinitely specked
with brilliant shimmers.

It immediately felt like a metaphor.

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We can all think of examples of when we've failed to love in the truest sense of the word.  
But I believe the failure has also been corporate, bigger than any one of us singly.

Recall how in the Gospels Jesus declares that "on this rock" – Petros, Peter – "I will build my church" (Mt. 16:18). And after the resurrection Peter goes out and helps spread the beginnings of the Christian Church:

on the foundation of a fallible human being –  
and that's what we still have.

Sometimes we look and can only see the history of the Church as a *lot* of mud.

It, like Peter, has failed and failed and failed again:  
an institution of oppression rather than liberation;  
an instigator of violence – from Holy Wars on Muslims  
to our own Congregational roots of witch hunts and Native American massacres;  
a hierarchy that was complicit with the abuse of the most vulnerable in society –  
the results of which are still coming out today.

We have failed as Christ's church.

You witness the truth of it in dwindling  
numbers in Protestant church attendance.  
You hear it from disillusioned Christians who've been  
hurt, disappointed or who rail about our hypocrisy.  
Maybe you even feel it yourself, and wonder why you  
keep returning to this broken body called the Church.

Just this week I admitted to another staff member how I'm guilty of embarrassment when I bring a Bible into a coffee shop, even as I work on a sermon. I'm afraid that people will think I'm "one of those *Christians*."

It's one of the small ways,  
but I have denied Christ.

What about Plymouth as an entity?

What are the ways we've denied Christ together?

Ways we've taken the more "acceptable" path in order to save ourselves from a cultural firing squad?

How have we denied being Christ's followers?

Sometimes the UCC has been accused of being the United Church of Causes –  
leaving Christ as a sideline of our faith.

Have *we* sometimes denied Christ  
in order to dissociate ourselves  
from that muddy history  
of the institutional Church?  
Have we sometimes done our work  
out in the world without claiming the C-word:                      Christian?

Yet this *is* the something that drives our justice work: Christ's call.

*Do you love me? Then tend my sheep.*

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With all that we lament about the Church of which we are a part,
do we finally let it go as a failed endeavor?

No.

When Peter gave it up, returned to the familiar path of his livelihood, his spirit couldn't rest.
The very moment when the fishermen recognized the Risen One on the beach,
Peter dove into the water to reach him as quickly as possible.

And beside a charcoal fire –
much like the one around which he'd denied Jesus 3 times –
Peter received renewal
3 times.

But this wasn't just a moment of forgiveness for his failure.
Jesus also reminded Peter of his call, his work, the true ministry of the Church:

Do you love me?
Feed my lambs;
tend my sheep;
feed my sheep.
If you love me, share that love with all that *I* love.

It won't be easy, he assures his disciple.
In fact, you'll probably have to give up all that you cherish in this world – even your life.
But just like Peter we can't go back,
return to simply being
in this world and our culture
without thinking about our call;
we can't let go of our Christian faith –
even if it means cultural crucifixion.

Because amidst the muck and mud of our humanness,
Christ has been revealed in shining brilliance.
Sometimes we need to re-learn to notice
how the one cannot be separated from the other.

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Here, as Peter at the charcoal fire with the Risen One,  
**we** have an opportunity to let go the past failures,  
learn from them, begin intentional change,  
and recommit ourselves to what we are called to do in love.

I believe the Church *can* be renewed – *but only through each of us*.  
We may fail and fail and fail again...  
but hopefully  
only in the small ways...

...So that the shimmering light of Christ can shine through.