

“Off Target”

Salado UMC, Salado, Tx 76571

Preaching Text: Mark 14:27-42

13 September 2020—15th Sunday after Pentecost

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“If love be blind, love cannot hit the mark”

(—William Shakespeare [1564 – 1616], *Romeo and Juliet*, Act II, sc. 1).

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I suppose that Palm Sunday is a lot like our troupe of characters in Mark’s Gospel—the disciples. Like Palm Sunday, the disciples’ day we call Palm Sunday begins with what we might identify as a promising start. Yet, by the end of Holy Week circumstances have completely soured. We now have a tragic situation on our hands. The disciples moreover seem to have promise in their beginning. So, both the disciples and Holy Week appear to have a promising start, yet things soon go downhill. Nonetheless, Jesus freely gives many opportunities for the twelve disciples to bounce back from the error of their ways.

Similar to most preachers, I remember that rare and distinctive moment when everything went right when speaking to a group. Some years ago, a service club—like the Lions, Kiwanis, or Rotary Club—asked me to speak to them. As most of the members were well-heeled business people, I began with an amusing look at some items lifted from actual resumes of people seeking employment.

Some of these statements, excised from authentic resumes, were comical, in a sad, pathetic sort of way. Included in the resumes were these statements:

- Wholly responsible for two (2) failed financial institutions.**
- Failed bar exam with relatively high grades.**
- It’s best for my employers that I not work with people.**
- I have an excellent track record, although I am not a horse.**
- Instrumental in ruining entire operation for a Midwest chain store.**
- Note: Please don’t misconstrue my 14 jobs as job hopping. I have never quit a job.**
- The company made me a scapegoat, just like my three previous employers.**

The people at the luncheon instinctively laughed. They recognized the kinds of people about which I spoke. These business people had faced these sorts of resumes firsthand. Hear the days, lesson, Mark 14:27-42:

27 Jesus said to them, “You will all falter in your faithfulness to me. It is written, I will hit the shepherd, and the sheep will go off in all directions. 28 But after I’m raised up, I will go before you to Galilee.” 29 Peter said to him, “Even if everyone else stumbles, I won’t.”

30 But Jesus said to him, “I assure you that on this very night, before the rooster crows twice, you will deny me three times.” 31 But Peter insisted, “If I must die alongside you, I won’t deny you.” And they all said the same thing.

32 Jesus and his disciples came to a place called Gethsemane. Jesus said to them, “Sit here while I pray.” 33 He took Peter, James, and John along with him. He began to feel despair and was anxious. 34 He said to them, “I’m very sad. It’s as if I’m dying. Stay here and keep alert.” 35 Then he went a short distance farther and fell to the ground. He prayed that, if possible, he might be spared the time of suffering. 36 He said, “Abba, Father, for you all things are possible. Take this cup of suffering away from me. However—not what I want but what you want.”

37 He came and found them sleeping. He said to Peter, “Simon, are you asleep? Couldn’t you stay alert for one hour? 38 Stay alert and pray so that you won’t give in to temptation. The spirit is eager, but the flesh is weak.”

39 Again, he left them and prayed, repeating the same words. 40 And, again, when he came back, he found them sleeping, for they couldn’t keep their eyes open, and they didn’t know how to respond to him. 41 He came a third time and said to them, “Will you sleep and rest all night? That’s enough! The time has come for the Human One to be betrayed into the hands of sinners. 42 Get up! Let’s go! Look, here comes my betrayer” (Mark 14:27-42).

Mark depicted the disciples for the most part as living into Jesus’ quotation from Mark 14:38: “The spirit is eager, but the flesh is weak.” The twelve wanted to do right, but, like all of us, they had an agenda—which was not Jesus’ agenda. As we read Mark and his severest portrayal of the disciples of any Gospel writer, we also see Mark describing Jesus as constant, forgiving, and generous with second chances.

In our lessons thus far, I have tried to stay near Mark, but in Luke we see a nearly perfect case in point concerning second chances. Because Mark addresses the figure of the fig tree abundantly in our previous lessons, may we turn to Luke 13:6-9? In the setting of this Lucan parable, people ask Jesus about human suffering. Jesus tells them a parable. The parable addresses what we do with a fig tree that does not produce. The tree has not produced for three years, and in that time the owner has granted it clemency. All the owner’s and vinedresser’s care has yielded no figs. Thus, the frustrated owner declares: “Cut it down.” This is a practical approach. Why put time, energy, and resources into something that will never produce? This is a reasonable approach to a problem.

Nevertheless, the second part of the parable surprises us. The vinedresser, surely a servant in a much inferior role to the owner, negotiates on behalf of the hapless plant. He offers to dig around the roots and apply fertilizer (manure/dung) to help the plant reach its potential. The vinedresser goes far beyond what we might expect for his role—a slave/servant who cares for

plants. The result is he pleads mercy for the fig tree. He provides a “last chance” or “second chance” for the fig tree.

Returning to the core of Luke’s parable, people ask about other people’s suffering. But Jesus compels them to look at their own lives. What will they, the hearers/audience, do with their second chance? Jesus’ parable implies to us: What now are you going to do with your second chance? This is a Lenten kind of question for us.

My guess is that most of us will admit that we are not perfect. At times—maybe frequently—we “miss the mark” of our striving. “Missing the mark” is honestly just a simple and more well-mannered way of saying anything that pertains to sin. We have “missed the mark” sounds better to us than “We are sinners.”

Yet in some fundamental ways our lesson from Mark 14 addresses both “missing the mark” and “human sinfulness.” The disciples seemingly give slight heed to Jesus’ stern words to them. By not striving for loyalty to Jesus at Jesus’ crucial hour, the twelve separate themselves from Jesus.

Of course, we know many modern people who trivialize the notion of sin. This derisive attitude is similar to patronizing Lenten disciplines, for example. Our worship experiences of living and praying through Lent ought to confirm this circumstance. We now and then hear people say, “I’m giving up chocolates for Lent,” as if this denial is a great sacrifice. Still, “missing the mark” (or sin) fixes on the human condition in which we find ourselves. Sin does not so much mean “dancing, card playing, or drinking,” although many Christians have so understood sin that way. Rather, theologically, sin signifies a break in the divine/human relationship. Sin is separation from God and other people. “Missing the mark” can mean we aim at the wrong target! In a similar analogy, one leadership expert put it, “Don’t climb the ladder of success, that upon reaching the top, you find it leaning against the wrong wall.”

Obviously when we, or those disciples of two thousand years ago, set targets for our lives, we think we know what we want and desire. Yet, if anything, our experience should teach us that our appetites in Aristotle’s sense of appetite (pain and pleasure controlled by non-rational forces) tend to be moving targets. In a word or two: we change. So do our aims and tastes. Perhaps, this is why the disciples might have paid more attention to Jesus’ words. Remember, that Jesus warned the twelve three times about his suffering, death, and resurrection (Mark 8:31-32; 9:30-32; 10:32-34). Nonetheless, the disciples seemed either to pay scant attention to Jesus’ words or fully misunderstood them. “Sin as separation” or sin as “missing the mark”—either avenue still leads to sin. Our disciples (bless their little hearts) just seemed unwilling or unable to understand the nature of Jesus’ messiahship. Jesus words ring true today as in the first century: “Stay alert and pray so that you won’t give in to temptation. The spirit is eager, but the flesh is weak.”

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