

Flawed, Failed, and Precious

Exodus 32: 7-14 Luke 15: 1-10

During a practice session for the Green Bay Packers in 1959, things were not going well for brand new coach Vince Lombardi's team. The team had the worst record the year before – 1 win, 10 losses, and one tie. Lombardi was trying to turn this team around and was using his emotional intensity, his depth of knowledge, and his inspirational skills. He worked his players very hard, seeking to build strength and endurance.

Lombardi singled out one big, young guard on the offensive line for his failure to "put out." It was a hot, muggy day when the coach called this guard aside and blasted him, as only Lombardi could. "Son, you're a lousy football player. You're not blocking. You're not tackling. You're not putting out. As a matter of fact, it's all over for you today. Go take a shower." The big guard dropped his head and walked into the dressing room.

Forty-five minutes later when Lombardi walked in, he saw the big guard sitting in front of his locker still wearing his uniform. His head was bowed and he was sobbing quietly. Lombardi walked over to his football player and put his arm around his shoulder. "Son," he said, "I told you the truth. You are a lousy football player. You're not blocking. You're not tackling. You're not putting out. However, in all fairness to you, I should have finished the story. Inside of you, son, there is a great football player, and I'm going to stick by your side until the great football player inside of you has a chance to come out and assert himself."

With these words, the guard, Jerry Kramer, straightened up and felt a great deal better. As a matter of fact, he did so much better afterward that he went on to become one of the all-time greats in football. He formed part of an awesome offensive line that had a devastating play called the "Packer Sweep" for the way they cleared the path for running backs making an end run.

It must have been very tempting to give up on a guy who had played on a terrible team and was showing no signs of playing up to his capability. But Vince Lombardi kept up a relentless demand for excellence among his players. He kept the bar high, blowing up at non-performing players and rewarding his best performers.

It can be easy to write off the flawed and failed. That's what we do too often in our society. Many of the social advances we've made in the last 50 years have focused on treating those thought to be flawed and failed in a new way.

People with various disabilities are no longer consigned to pity and regarded as helpless. Yet there was a time when a disability meant a dead end, unless you were exceptional and had the resources to manage alternatives, like Franklin Delano Roosevelt.

Women faced (and sometimes continue to face) bias in the workplace and in social life, yet today we've seen several women run as serious candidates for President while plenty of others occupy the highest leadership positions in our society.

It's a real sign of progress that we're much less likely to label people into a particular box that limits them or discards them altogether. We're much more likely to recognize the promise that people have and work to enable their advancement and empower their abilities. We're still got a long way to go, but there are definite signs of solid progress, and the expectation of more to come.

What's required is a willingness to look beyond the flaws and the failures, the limitations and the restrictions, and have a vision for what can yet develop, like Coach Lombardi with his under-performing guard Jerry Kramer.

I guess the question is when do we give up on someone who consistently doesn't measure up. For most of us, and in most circumstances, there is a real limit. We may not be able to describe that fine line exactly, but we know that threshold when we get there. That's the point when we throw in the towel, wave the white flag, and walk away.

For the last several weeks, we've heard from the prophets who announce God's displeasure and disdain for the people of the covenant who have disregarded their obligations, dismissed expectations, and justified themselves along the way. I couldn't do another prophet denunciation, but fear not, there are plenty of other divine denunciations to draw upon.

In the Exodus story, God has hit that magical threshold with his Hebrew people whom God led out of Egypt, across the parted sea, guided through the wilderness, providing for their various needs as they arose. God is in the process of giving Moses the Ten Commandments when a raucous good time was heard from Aaron and the people of God down the mountain. They'd made a golden calf to worship and were whooping it up, celebrating their new god.

God yells at Moses about this turn of events. God has a full head of steam up. He tells Moses, *Go down [to] your people*. Now they're *your people*, Moses, because God really means they are not **my** people. Although God has ordered Moses to go down the mountain and do something with his people, in the next breath, it seems like God isn't waiting.

I have seen this people, how stiff-necked they are. Now let me alone, so that my wrath may burn hot against them and I may destroy them. Then I will make you a great nation.

God is at that point where God is completely there, ready to toss out the flawed and failed, and start all over again, virtually from scratch. God is ready to wipe out this covenant people. And God is ready to take the promise of Abraham and start over with Moses. God says: *Then I will make you a great nation, [Moses].*

Moses quickly goes into negotiation mode with God. Moses tries to convince God, not that these are really good people, flawed and failed who can do better. No, Moses tells God that it will look bad for God to appear to have saved and liberated a people only to bring them out in the desert and destroy them in a fit of anger. That really makes God look bad, and God doesn't want to look bad like that, right?

Moses also invokes the covenant made with Abraham, which Moses implicitly reminds God, was not conditioned on the excellent behavior of the descendants, but on the faithfulness and devotion of Abraham, Isaac, and Jacob. Y'know, God, they weren't totally perfect either. Right?

Moses has appealed to God's highest ethics in order to repress an ugly outburst of divine wrath. Can Moses change God's mind? Yes, he can because God relents.

Moses, on the hand, decides that this sinful people won't be getting off scot-free. Heads would roll, and I do mean heads rolled. But God stuck with the flawed and failed, a complete act of grace, undeserved by God's people.

A good next question would ask whether you need to make an appeal like Moses, a presenting an argument that persuades God to act differently from the way that God may have intended only a moment before. Knowing that we have no ground for argument, no righteousness of our own to pledge, claim, or exchange, we ought to think about how this works. Because we know how we fit the mold of flawed and failed, we have to hope that there is something better than trying to persuade God with our wit and wisdom.

For some insight, we can turn to the two parables that Jesus tells in our passage at the start of Luke 15.

It seems that Jesus was hanging out with the usual rabble, the tax collectors and other sinners, the flawed and failed as far as the social standards were concerned. He was teaching them about the Kingdom of God and the promise of new life.

Some Pharisees and scribes are appalled. *This man welcomes sinners and eats with them.* Jesus is making himself unclean by keeping company with such people. It's sinful arrogance to set oneself among such people as if there were no consequences.

Jesus hears their muttering and grumbling. He tells them these parables to help them understand the focus of his ministry. Who knows; maybe they'll get it.

He talks of the shepherd who loses one of his hundred sheep. Rather recklessly, he leaves the other 99 sheep in the open country and goes searching for the one lost sheep. In other words, the shepherd is willing to risk his entire flock, possibly all of his wealth, all of his promise, in order to seek out and save the one lost sheep. The one thing Jesus' audience should realize is that this sheep is precious to the shepherd. It isn't precious because it is such a well-behaved sheep. Instead, it's a real bonehead sheep, like the one on the bulletin cover. This moron sheep is probably screwing up all the time,

getting itself into all kinds of trouble, causing the shepherd fits on a regular basis. Still the shepherd leaves his flock and goes off searching for this flawed and failed sheep.

The answer to the question we asked before, about how we would fare if we could not appeal, like Moses, with wit and wisdom to prevail on God's good graces to get a change of God's attitude, finds its answer here in Jesus' parable. The lost ones, the flawed and failed, are precisely the ones who need God and God's blessing and providence the most. As Jesus, the good shepherd, pursues the flawed and failed, Jesus acts as God has decided to act, and from the same spirit. God and Jesus regard the flawed and failed as precious, worthy of seeking out and bringing back to the fold.

Let's go further with the next parable of the lost coin. The circumstances are similar. A woman loses one of her ten silver coins. She is far from destitute since she has nine silver coins. It isn't her last coin. Yet she acts as if those other nine coins don't matter. Suddenly this lost coin has become precious, valued enough to drop everything and exhaustively search to find the lost one.

Let's also note how both woman and the shepherd rejoice when the lost one is found. They celebrate the recovery of the one that was lost, calling friends and neighbors to share in the delight of recovering the flawed and the failed, the one lost and become precious. *Rejoice with me* each of them says to their friends and neighbors, for the precious one has been gained anew.

We should see in the image of the flawed and failed a reflection of ourselves before God. We know what Jesus teaches, and we know that the expectations remain very high. Like the sheep on the cover, we're prone to finding ourselves in a real mess, having done something stupid ... again.

The other piece is for us to be aware of the flawed and failed around us, the ones who have become lost, neglected, discarded. They're flawed and failed only in the sense of how our society regards these folks. Our society is not the kingdom of God where the lost are pursued extravagantly and relentlessly and even recklessly. We're cautious, not wanting to give up too much to save the jerks from the fate that they must have created for themselves. We're fine with letting flawed people fail and condemning them for it.

Jesus' teaching about the Kingdom once again points us toward the strange, unique and blessed priorities of our gracious and loving God. The flawed and failed; we're all precious in God's sight. Let's not forget that for ourselves, and for those who may be different from us, but are only flawed and failed in a different way. They're precious, just as we are.