

Coping with Disappointment

Matthew 26:20-46

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Palm/Passion Sunday

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Their faces were all over the news this week. Their photos splashed on the Internet, newspapers, and televisions. Their tragedy became the monologues for late night comedians, and the media had a field day at their expense.

There is one photo that sticks out the most to me. He is at the podium, his lips turned down, his hand holding the piece of paper from which he was reading. And she is there at his side, in her well-coiffed hair and smart scarf, but with a look of such grief on her face.

The man is Eliot Spitzer, the governor of New York, who earlier this week admitted to some indecent acts. The woman is his wife, Silda, whose weary eyes seemed to speak volumes.

As I saw this photo all over the press, I couldn't help but imagine what they must be experiencing. The betrayal. The grief. The disappointment. In his behavior. In their marriage.

I was so drawn to her face, in part because I, and I imagine all of us, have at one time or another experienced a tremendous sense of disappointment. Maybe not with the same degree of publicity as the Spitzers, but with the same gutwrenching pain of feeling so profoundly let down.

It's a difficult thing with our expectations don't match reality: when we expect someone to be trustworthy, and they aren't; when we have our hopes set on something, and it doesn't happen.

Disappointment can be one of the most debilitating emotions, taking the wind right out of our sails so that we are left lost and adrift.

If there is one emotion that pervades our text from Matthew this morning, I think disappointment is it. The story we heard is one night in the last week of Jesus' life, but the entire week – the entire passion story – seems to be a story of profound and utter disappointment.

It shouldn't be this way. It's not how the week, or even this service, started. There shouldn't be talk of arrest and betrayal. This is the Christ the king, the man hailed upon the donkey, for whom people laid down their cloaks and branches and shouted "Hosanna!"

But by the time we get to this Thursday night, the parade is long over. The people have gone home. The palms lay wilting in the street. It's as if a cloud cover has settled over Jerusalem, and disappointment hangs in the air.

It's easy to see in the disciples. Here is their leader, Jesus – the person they've spent three years with, the person for whom they have given up their livelihoods, the person who has taught them about the coming of the kingdom of God. And now all this talk about betrayal and arrest and crucifixion. Where is God's hand in this? Perhaps this Jesus isn't who they thought he was.

And then there is the disappointment in themselves. At the last supper, we hear Jesus predict the betrayal by Judas, the denial by Peter, and the desertion by all of the disciples. One by one, they each promise to be loyal, but none of them lives up the task.

In the scene just after the Garden of Gethsemane, Judas will show up with the guards to turn in Jesus, betraying his friend with a kiss, and selling out his teacher 30 pieces of silver. How can this man, who has sat by Jesus' side for three years, do such a thing?

That's what Judas himself seems to ask the next day, when Jesus is condemned to death, and Judas realizes what he has done. He experiences profound disappointment.

The same goes for Peter, who counted himself Jesus' most loyal friend. Peter goes so far as to follow Jesus after he is arrested, but before the night is out, Jesus' prediction has come true. A servant girl asks Peter if he knows this Jesus character, and Peter flatly denies it...three times. The rooster crows and Peter remembers the prediction. Tears begin to stream down his face as he realizes what he has done.

How could he do this? To his friend? He, too, experiences profound disappointment.

But the disappointment is not reserved for the disciples alone. It seems that Jesus experiences it, too.

Can you imagine living, working, teaching, and socializing with a small group of people for over three years, pouring your life out for them, only to have them abandon you in your hour of need?

All he asks is for them to stay awake. Stay awake with him while he prays. Be present to him in his grief. And they cannot.

In fact, they end up leaving him. After Jesus is arrested on this Thursday night, the disciples flee and he does not seem them again while he is alive.

There is his disappointment in his disciples, but then there is another disappointment, too: Jesus' disappointment in God.

Here he has done everything he was supposed to do—lived well, loved well, taught well, healed, stood up to injustice, proclaimed peace—and still he is going to be put to death. His anxiety is real. He throws himself on the ground and begs to God, "Let this cup pass from me."

And then there will be Jesus' deep anguish as he cries from the cross, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?"

Utter disappointment.

In this passion story, no one's expectations have been fulfilled. Not the disciples', not Jesus'. And so this passion is thick with anguish, thick with grief, thick with disappointment.

Now there is the temptation in this season of the Christian year to want to skip over some of these more difficult parts of the story. Why dwell in darkness, when we know light is coming? Why dwell on death, when we know that resurrection awaits?

We want to skip right to the empty tomb, but, in truth, the emptiness comes first. And to gloss over the disappointment means we miss out on part of the story, on part of our own story. This is the part that allows us to acknowledge our own disappointments.

Now we live in a culture that does not do well with disappointment, or grief, or sadness, or any of those kinds of emotions. People like to offer us quick fixes—a little retail therapy or self-help books that promise seven ways to have a happier life. People don't like disappointment because it's too often tied to shame or weakness or vulnerability.

But it seems avoiding it isn't the answer either. Judas tried that approach. When he realizes he has helped to condemn an innocent man, he tries to return the thirty silver coins. Sadly his grief is still so profound he ends up taking his own life. Surely this is not what God would have wanted.

Peter, upon his denial, begins to weep. He weeps bitterly, for himself, for his friend, experiencing the pain and anguish.

Likewise Jesus, cries out to God. Jesus cries and prays, cries and prays, experiencing the pain. And yet, with each prayer, he also submits himself to God, saying, "not my will but yours." It's a statement of trust that somehow God will get him through.

While Judas cannot contain his grief, Peter and Jesus sit in theirs. And while disappointment is part of their story, it is not the end of the story...

On the same night that Jesus predicted Judas' betrayal, Peter's denial, and the disciples' desertion, he also predicted reunion and restoration.

He called his friends together for a meal. He called all of them to the table, including the one who he knew would betray him with the kiss, the one he knew would deny him three times in the coming hours, and the other ten, who he knew would desert him before the night was out. And at that meal, he promised them, "I will drink with you again in God's kingdom."

Jesus promised them renewal. Jesus knew disappointment was coming, for him, for the disciples, but he knew renewal would come, too. The disciples would desert him, but they would come back together again. Peter would deny him, but Peter would sit at the table again. Jesus would die, but Jesus would be alive again. And all of them, including even Judas, would find a seat at the heavenly banquet.

Thus the passion story, while being a story of disappointment is also a story of hope.

On the one hand, it gives us permission to recognize our profound disappointments, to experience our grief, to acknowledge our losses, and to admit that things don't always turn out the way we expect.

But, on the other hand, it gives us the assurance that God is with us. God has been in our shoes; Jesus knows our disappointment; and we will get to the other side.

The way to new life is not around disappointment or in lieu of it, but right through the middle of it. That is the passion story. Disappointment comes. Anguish comes. Grief comes. But hope will come, too.

Blessed is the one who comes in the name of God! Amen.

