

“Dealing with Disappointment”

a sermon by

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Text: “And they cast lots for them, and the lot fell on Matthias; and he was added to the eleven apostles” (Acts 1:26).

On November 15, 2006 Bill Moyers of PBS delivered an address entitled “The Meaning of Freedom” at the United States Military Academy at West Point, New York. In that address he noted that in the months leading up to the Iraq invasion, Rupert Murdoch, the media tycoon who put his media empire at the service of the government in making the case for war, said that “the greatest thing to come of this to the world economy, if you could put it that way, would be the price of \$20 a barrel for oil.” Once the war is behind us, he said, “The whole world will benefit from cheaper oil, which will be a bigger stimulus than anything else.”

Today Murdoch says that he still believes that it was right “to go in there” and from a historical perspective the U.S. death toll in Iraq has been “minute.”

I suppose on one level that may be true. Fifty-five thousand American soldiers died in Vietnam and during the Civil War fifty thousand Union and Confederate soldiers died at the Battle of Gettysburg. So in terms of the number of soldiers who have died through the years in the wars fought by this country the number of the three thousand women and men who have died in Iraq may not be so large, but in terms of individual lives and families there is no such thing as “minute.”

I thought of Murdoch’s words when I read of the death of Emily Perez, a Second Lieutenant in the United States Army. She was the first woman of color to become a Command Sergeant Major in the history of West Point, and the first woman graduate of the academy to die in Iraq. She came to West Point from Washington, D.C., where she had distinguished herself in

many ways. People remember her as a “little superwoman”-- straight A’s, choir membership, charismatic, optimistic, a friend to so many. She had joined the medical service because she wanted to help people. The obituary in the *Washington Post* said that she had been a “ball of fire” at the Peace Baptist Church, where she helped start an HIV-AIDS Ministry after some of her own family members contracted the virus. Accounts of her funeral said that fellow West Pointers wept as they contemplated the loss of so vibrant an officer.

One of the most perplexing questions that people face is the question of why one person suffers and another doesn’t. This past week in our community a young mother died leaving behind a grieving husband and two children. And always the question is “why.” Why this person and not some other? Why did Second Lieutenant Perez have to die and not someone else?

I.

There is a story at the beginning of the Book of Acts that lends some insight into the whole question about despair and disappointment. After the death of Judas Iscariot there was a crisis in the early church. Judas had not only betrayed Jesus, he had betrayed the movement as well. Judas had sold his master for thirty pieces of silver and had taken the money to buy a field where later he committed suicide. Jesus had been betrayed by one of his own disciples and the result of this was that whereas there had been twelve chosen disciples, there were now only eleven.

The number twelve was important. There were twelve tribes in the nation of Israel. Jesus had appointed twelve disciples. Before the coming of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost it was important that someone be elected to fill the void created by the death of Judas.

So we read that two candidates were brought forth. One was Joseph, called Barsabbas. The other was a man by the name of Matthias.

We do not know a lot about either of these two men. We know that both possessed the one necessary requirement for this position: they had both been with Jesus for the entire time of his ministry.

We read that after the names had been placed in nomination the whole group that had assembled prayed. Then they cast lots, which probably meant that they put two stones each with a name on it and put the stones in a jar. Then they shook the jar until one of the names fell out. Matthias won and Joseph called Barsabbas lost. We do not really know what become of either of them, although the church later tried to continue the Matthias tradition by identifying him with the Gospel of Matthew and other personalities in the New Testament. As for Joseph of Barsabbas, he was not remembered at all.

So what happens when one person is chosen and one is not? Why do bad things seem to happen to some people, while others seem to be spared, and how does a person deal with a great loss or disappointment?

II.

For one thing, times of loss and great disappointment in our personal lives are often times of testing, and a person, like a nation, is often who he or she proves himself to be in these times of testing. Some people when they are tested in such a fashion, collapse and are brought to despair. Others grow cynical and lose all faith in a bigoted and diabolical world. Still others fall back on self-pity and feel sorry for themselves. Now all of these responses are natural, but we should not be content with them. Sir Humphrey Davey, a great scientist, once said about his scientific discoveries that the most important of his discoveries had been suggested to him by his failures.

Disappointment and deep sorrow can often be times in which we are tested and how we respond determines in many ways how the rest of our lives will be lived. Once there was a young man in Illinois, who ran for the legislature and was defeated. Then he entered business, and failed, and spent 17 years paying the debts of a worthless partner. As a young man he fell passionately in love with a girl only to lose her to death. In 1846 this young attorney ran for Congress, was elected, served one term, and then was defeated when he ran for reelection. He tried for an appointment to the United States Land Office and failed. Then, he was defeated for the United States Senate. In 1856, as a candidate for the Vice Presidency he was beaten. Then two years later Douglas beat him again. When he was elected President of the United States in 1860, Abraham Lincoln found himself facing a Civil War that he would have given his life to prevent.

This past Spring when I visited the Lincoln Memorial in Washington, D.C., and read the words of the Gettysburg Address and the Second Inaugural Address, I was moved by the way that this one man was able to bring a country together, to forgive a defeated enemy, to declare “with malice to none and with charity to all.” Much of the character of Abraham Lincoln was forged through hardship, defeat, and the death of a child. Real character is always that way. We don’t learn nearly as much through our successes as through our failures.

III.

Then, too, times of disappointment and despair can also be times when faith is deepened and new beginnings are made. If this is our Father’s world, and if God is really sovereign in it and over it, then there is more to our lives than what we can see. The Christian faith stands or fails on this. If God is only an idea in the mind, if Christ is only a name in the history books, then all we do is a sham. Our faith rests on the conviction that the God who liberated the Hebrews from the bondage of the Egyptians, who makes all things new, who gives sight to the blind, who sets the captive free, is still a God who does this.

This week on the *ABC Evening News* there was a feature on poverty in America by Diane Sawyer. She interviewed a young boy named Ivan from Camden, New Jersey, who was going to school for the first time. Camden, New Jersey was recently named the most dangerous city in America with a murder rate more than seven times the national average. Ivan’s family was homeless. He lived with his mother and his little brother. When he entered kindergarten, he was very frightened. He had never seen the inside of a school. His teacher was trying to teach him

about things that come in threes: a tricycle with three wheels, a stool with three legs. The teacher was continuing the conversation about things in groups of three. She asked him to name the three meals that a person ate a day. This young four-year-old boy had no idea what she was talking about. He didn't know there was any such thing as breakfast, lunch, and supper. He had never had three meals in a single day.

Ivan is one of the twelve million children in this country who go to bed hungry each night--twelve million in the wealthiest nation in the world who don't even know that there are supposed to be three meals a day.

But Ivan had something else. He had faith. "I want to go to school so bad," he said, "I want to learn how to read."

Sometimes when we are brought face to face with the struggles that people like Ivan face, we get a different perspective on life. The man who had a heart attack said how easy it was, lying there on the hospital bed, to sort out the really important things from the trivial ones. Sometimes a disease, a disappointment, or a loss allows us to see things in a different way.

In Narvik, Norway, in the midst of World War II when things were at their worst and the Nazis had control of the entire city and the Allied warplanes were bombing the city to try to chase the Nazis, the Mayor of Narvik said to a group of citizens, "Look, the mountains are still ours." Many have said the same thing in times of great sorrow and disappointment. "The mountains are still ours." Sometimes the problem that we have is that we cannot focus on the mountains, only the valleys. God in Christ, elected by God, rejected by men, crucified, raised, living still. That is a perspective that gives us hope in the valleys of life.

IV.

Then, there is this. Sometimes there is a dark side to every disappointment or sorrow that must be held in tension with the view from the hill. We might call it the "but if not" of faith and history. That is to say, sometimes the disappointment is so bitter, the sorrow so great, that there seems to be no way out. Sometimes terrible things happen. The child dies, despite our prayers. The suicide happens. The divorce is no better than the marriage. What then, Joseph called Barsabbas, do you do now?

It is reported that John Bunyan, the author of Pilgrim's Progress, was once held in prison for his beliefs and called upon to renounce his faith in Christ. But in that great night of the soul, Bunyan said this:

"I am for going on and risking my eternal state with Christ. I will leap off the ladder into eternity blindfolded. Sink or swim, come heaven or hell....Lord Jesus, if you will, catch me. But if not, I will ever venture for your name!

Thanks be to God. Amen!