

The Reverend Patricia Phaneuf Alexander  
The Feast of Christ the King ~ 23 November 2025  
St. Dunstan's, Bethesda  
Colossians 1:11-20  
Psalm 46  
Luke 23:33-43

A few years ago, Smith College, in Northampton, Massachusetts, introduced an initiative called “Failing Well.” Two times – first at new student orientation in the fall, and then during final exams in the spring – a Jumbotron-sized screen was set up in the heart of campus projecting true confessions from students and faculty about times their very best efforts did not turn out as intended. Picture it:

“I failed my first college writing exam.”

“Sophomore year. Flat-out, whole semester of F’s on the transcript, bombed out, washed out, flunked out.”  
(That was from a professor.)

And so on. Imagine being assaulted with such messages just as you are starting out a new endeavor, or just as you are about to be evaluated on it.

If that feels undermining, or off-putting – or even downright cruel – there is a reason for that. We are so conditioned to understand “success” according to certain set of objective metrics that the thought of achieving anything less is terrifying.

Or is it just me?

I don’t think it is, frankly.

The team behind the “Failing Well” project at Smith were not trying to hurt or demoralize their students. On the contrary: The goal was to “demystify failure,” to help the community understand that mistakes and missteps are a natural, predictable, *inevitable* part of life.

In other words, get next to it.

As one of the professors behind “Failing Well” explains,

For many of our students — those who have had to be almost perfect to get accepted into a school like Smith — failure can be an unfamiliar experience. So when it happens, it can be crippling.

Does that ring a bell? Does it “land” with you at all?

I’m not just talking about our children: I mean, does it sound to *you* and your own journey?

What would it be like if we set up a Jumbotron here in the parking lot at St. Dunstan’s? What might it say? What “true confession” would you make about a time you failed?

Think about that for a second, please — and no, I am not going to ask you to share (at least not right now...).

For many, many folks in the DC area, and certainly here in Bethesda, “perfection” and “drivenness” are worn like a badge of honor. Highly-educated, accustomed to hitting our benchmarks and reaching our goals, this, too, is a community that can be crippled by failure.

That isn’t a criticism: It is an observation made out of deep respect, love, and concern.

*And* a recognition that I’ve found my tribe here. I’ll tell you what I would put up on that screen:

When I was in fourth grade, I got so upset about missing a division problem in math class that I ran out of the room and hid in a bathroom stall until a teacher came to find me.

True story. I was *nine*.

So, lest you ever think that I’m pointing fingers or somehow think that I am “holier than thou,” remember that the preacher always, always is talking to herself, too.

One student at Smith who was interviewed for the *New York Times* article in which this Jumbotron story appeared, had this to say about the experience:

On our campus, everything can feel like such a competition, I think we get caught up in this idea of presenting an image of perfection. So

to see these failures being talked about openly, for me I sort of felt like, “O.K., this is O.K., everyone struggles.”<sup>1</sup>

It sounds so simple, doesn’t it, and so true – especially coming from a college student just beginning to learn how to navigate the world and this challenging thing called being human.

Yes, everyone struggles. Everyone fails. Everyone – wait for it – sins. No one here, no one at your place of employment or school, no one you will ever meet (this side of the grave, at least) is exempt.

Let’s try to get next to that, shall we?

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I recently read an article that began with the provocative statement, “Failure is at the heart of what Christian[s] have to offer the world.”<sup>2</sup>

*Failure is at the heart of what Christian[s] have to offer the world.*

Again: This wasn’t a critique of the ways the Church today is missing the mark, not thriving as it should. No: It was intended as a reminder of the powerful, precious gift – the “treasure,” as St. Paul calls it – that Christians hold and are meant to share:

The Gospel. The story of Jesus – a story, as we just heard again, that includes the death of the protagonist.

As the author of that article goes on to say,

on any account, the most arresting fact about [Christianity] is realizing that Jesus himself was actually killed. By all normal appearances, that is, his life’s work did not end in the triumphant establishment of God’s reign but in a shameful death and a scattering of his most committed workers. In short, from the point of view of his death, Jesus’ whole ministry was a failure.<sup>3</sup>

Maybe we should project that on a Jumbotron. I’m not kidding.

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.nytimes.com/2017/06/24/fashion/fear-of-failure.html>

<sup>2</sup> <https://faithandleadership.com/c-kavin-rowe-failure-christ-shaped-leadership>

<sup>3</sup> <https://faithandleadership.com/c-kavin-rowe-becoming-christ-shaped-leader>

Because, as St. Paul also preaches, “the message about the cross is foolishness” (1 Cor. 1:18). In the eyes of the world the story of the Crucifixion it is not about victory or success or getting a hefty end-of-year bonus.

It is about agony. And defeat. And unimaginable suffering—public suffering, by the way. There is no privacy, no respect for the victim’s dignity. To our 21<sup>st</sup>-century sensibilities, it is inhumane.

And this is what the Church, what you and I and this community of faith, has to offer our neighbors here in Bethesda, our colleagues in the greater Washington area, and indeed the world.

This is “Good News”?

Yes. This *is* Good News.

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Today is the Feast of Christ the King, the last Sunday of the Church year; next week we begin anew with the beautiful Season of Advent. This morning we celebrate the ultimate Kingship of Jesus. It is the Feast’s 100<sup>th</sup> birthday today: It was created by Pope Pius XI in 1925, when Europe was still recovering from war, and the economy was unstable. People were afraid and turning to human “saviors” that promised to rescue them. So the Pope established Christ the King to remind the world that *no* earthly ruler is the ultimate Sovereign. Jesus reveals what Divine Kingship looks like – over individuals, communities, nations, and governments.

But Jesus is an unlikely King. He has no purple robes. No crown. No palace. And His “courtiers” are no more suited to attend royalty than fly to the moon.

Still, Jesus says, the Kingdom of God, the Kingdom of Heaven, is at hand. He has come to usher in a new order, where the last are first and the first don’t necessarily fare as well as they once expected. He inaugurates a different sort of reign, where the best seats in the house go not to the rich and famous but to the poor, the widow, the sick, the friendless, and the sinner. He demonstrates glory not with glitz or glamour, but with gentleness, forgiveness, humility, and compassion.

It's not accidental, then, that our Gospel for today is the story of the Crucifixion. This morning Jesus is at His weakest and most vulnerable and humiliated. He is about as far from the courts of power and influence as we can imagine.

As one theologian comments,

Don't be fooled by paintings and sculptures depicting Christ's crucifixion as a serene event. He did not hang there looking charming, His arms outstretched to bless humanity in a farewell gesture of sorts... The truth is dire. Christ's passion was horribly ugly.<sup>4</sup>

And the failure of Jesus's mission is projected on a screen so much bigger than any Jumbotron human hands can fashion. After all, did Jesus not say, "I have come that they might have life, and have it abundantly" (John 10:10b)? There is nothing abundant about the optics, the appearance, of the Crucifixion. It screams scarcity and weakness and defeat – words diametrically-opposed to the values of Empire in Jesus' time, in 1920's Europe, and in our own day.

Yet this is, in fact, the Good News that the world has needed for 2,000 years – and that we need to hear now. At a time when our children, youth, and young adults are assaulted with messages about being "proud and prosperous," and "greater, stronger, and far more exceptional than ever before,"<sup>5</sup> the image of the crucified Christ the King is essential.

The message of the cross is, indeed, "foolishness" in the eyes of anyone living in a house of cards whose foundation is the fallacy of earthly power and dominion. But *that* house will, inevitably, fall. It may appear to be sturdy and well-constructed, but in reality it is just paper – flimsy and insubstantial.

The late biblical scholar Walter Brueggemann put it this way:

Moving from scarcity to abundance depends on understanding that the world is God's creation, not a system of zero-sum economics... The gospel is fiction when judged by the empire, but the empire is fiction when judged by the gospel.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>4</sup> <https://reporter.lcms.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/12/LWapr06.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> <https://www.whitehouse.gov/remarks/2025/01/the-inaugural-address/>

<sup>6</sup> <https://emu.edu/now/news/2012/accumulation-seduces-christians/>

Wow. Let's pause to take that in.

Brueggemann also argued that what he called the “accumulation narrative” – accumulation of money, of possessions, of influence, of power – is at odds, fundamentally, with the “abundance narrative” of the gospel. Yet still we try “to juggle them and hope no one notices.”<sup>7</sup>

Maybe, friends, it is time to stop juggling. Maybe this is the moment for us to take seriously the values of Christ our King. We don't tend to go for kings so much in this country – but that, I believe, is precisely because the examples we have seen of earthly kingship are completely contradictory to the Kingdom of God.

It is time for us to take seriously the call to pattern our lives on *Jesus'* life and example, striving – over time (perhaps over one's whole life) – to set our own egos aside. It is time to learn how to empty ourselves, not living for praise or recognition or the illusion of perfection. It is time to practice serving and sacrificing for the other.

And it is time to learn how to forgive one another – and ourselves – when we fail. Because we will.

Let's put *that* on a Jumbotron. Let's share this Good News with our children and young people, and ourselves. Let's *be* a gift for the world.

*Amen.*

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<sup>7</sup> Brueggemann, “Accumulation Seduces Christians”