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 Texts: Mark 6: 1-13; Matthew 11: 28-30
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A Sacrament for the Weary¹

There's a book that generations of parents have read to their children. If parents haven't been the ones reading it, then teachers have. If teachers haven't then television has. It's *The Little Engine That Could*. Everyone knows the story – it's like a foundational myth in American culture. A batch of toys needs to be delivered to a farm on the other side of a high mountain. A powerful locomotive is needed for the job, but several otherwise viable candidates are found to be wanting. They are too pessimistic. One repeats, over and over, "I cannot. I cannot." Meanwhile, despite his inadequate appearance, the little engine is optimistic. It repeats, over and over, "I think I can, I think I can," and it does. It hauls the heavy load up and over the mountain, arriving safely to deliver the toys. The moral of the story is, believe in yourself, and you can achieve great things.

I visited the Amazon page for the *Little Engine That Could* the other day in an attempt to gauge just how popular the story remained. The array of different versions of the book suggest that it's popular indeed. There's the original edition, which is now more than 100 years old. There's an abridged edition for younger readers. There's an updated edition with newer illustrations. There's a film version. There's a series of 14 related books in a series that features the little engine. There's even a book of wisdom from the little engine, which I gather is meant to be given to people upon graduations. All those versions come as no surprise. It reflects a prevailing "can do" spirit of American culture, one that generations of young readers have now inherited from their elders.

Throughout much of the pandemic, my own messages from Sunday to Sunday have tended toward that "can do" sense of optimism. Whether we like it or not, we've all been given an immense load to haul across a mountain, and more than a little "can do" optimism seems warranted, and needed. That's not inconsistent with our faith. In faith, we can walk on water. In faith, we can see storms quieted and calmed. In faith, we are strengthened to do impossible things. That's all true.

But I think we also require something deeper and more substantive than "can do" optimism. That felt especially true of this past week. Last Sunday we conducted a conversation with police leaders, one that felt enormously hopeful to me and to everyone who participated in it. The following day I felt cut off at the knees by the news of Daunte Wright's murder at the hands of a police officer – and during the trial of the very officer who killed George Floyd. No amount of positive community relations, no amount of "can do" optimism about reform, can alter the fact that having a weaponized police force that's armed to the teeth is going to result in needless death, especially for people of color. Dispiriting is one word for the feeling that set in. Despair is another. Add to that a stoppage to the use of one of the vaccines crucial to beating back the virus. Add to that the news of withdrawal from Afghanistan, a forever war that likely shouldn't

¹ With gratitude to Eugene Bay, who showed the way...

have been fought in the first place. Add to that yet another mass shooting. Add to that as well the painful news of the death of Miguel Torres, a dear friend of many in this congregation. Optimism isn't what is required in such moments.

Throughout much of our lives, a profound gap exists between what we expect, and what we actually experience. We expect law enforcement officials who behave justly and equitably. What we get is another murdered young person. We expect swift progress with vaccinations – which, to be fair, we have had. What we get are questions generated by aberrant reactions among a very few. We expect – or at least some expect - that the use of military force can help stabilize certain regions of the world, preventing further violence. What we experience is a forever war, in which little is actually accomplished. We expect that we should be able to curtail gun violence. We experience more and more mass shootings. We expect to make progress on issues of racial justice, but we experience the same issues faced by previous generations. We expect to reunite a family, and to help keep a few individual lives from falling apart. We experience, instead, the tragic death of a father. We expect that through vigilance and care, we can keep the virus and its worst effects at bay. What we experience, however, is often the opposite. Despite our best efforts, it can find us.

Kurt Vonnegut wrote about that gap in a late career novel called *Hocus Pocus*. The American library, he wrote, “is full of stories of supposed triumphs, which makes me suspicious of it. It’s misleading for people to read about great successes, since even for middle class and upper class white people, in my experience, failure is the norm.” He went on to say, “It is unfair to youngsters particularly to leave them wholly unprepared for...monster screw ups and starring roles in Keystone Kop comedies and much, much, worse.”²

It might be that Vonnegut exaggerates when he says that “failure is the norm.” But he has a point. Failures occur. Businesses don't work out. Not every marriage or long term relationship is built to last. Some surgeries are not successful. Some investment decisions prove to be less than wise. Not every student makes the honor roll. Not everyone who shows up on the lawn of the First Congregational Church of Old Lyme for Sunday worship has had a terrific week. Same for those tuning in online. It goes without saying that not every sermon preached from this pulpit works in the way they're intended to. God knows I have preached my share of sermons that, so far as I could tell, went nowhere and moved nobody. Parents and children, teachers and students, ministers and parishioners, friends and colleagues – we all fail each other sometimes, and our interactions can be filled with blunders and betrayals. We shouldn't be surprised when these things happen, but often we are. Kurt Vonnegut is probably right about the reason. We're taught to expect success. We're taught that if we just grit our teeth and exercise some steely determination, that anything is possible – if only we think we can. We're taught success, but are left unprepared to experience failure. Need I mention the former President?

Vonnegut's point is that eventually, we come to moments within our lives in which we can say “I think I can” all we want, but the reality is that we simply cannot. Sometimes the load is too heavy, the mountain too steep, and our engine just isn't adequate. Meanwhile, all that doctrinaire optimism leaves us defenseless when we do experience disappointment, frustration, and failure. That defenselessness means that we're especially vulnerable to cynicism, to chronic

² Vonnegut, Kurt, *Hocus Pocus* (New York: Berkley Books, 1990), pg. 33.

pessimism, and ultimately, to nihilism. That's why we need something deeper than "can do" optimism. We need a sacrament for the weary.

There's a much neglected episode in the Gospel of Mark in which Jesus addresses this experience with frustration, failure, and general weariness. He had returned to his hometown after having performed some of his most remarkable acts, but the reception he received at home was mixed at best. In fact, it was downright disappointing. His former neighbors dismissed him as something of a fraud, and Mark reports that Jesus could do no deed of power there. And so he moves on, instructing his disciples to go out into neighboring villages two by two. In his instructions to them, Jesus says, "If anyone will not welcome you, and they refuse to hear you, leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet as a testimony against them."

It is a sacrament for the disappointed, for the weary, for failure itself. Ernest Campbell, a former minister of the Riverside Church, said this about Jesus's neglected sacrament: "What if Jesus instituted this symbolic act for his disciples' sake, to prevent them from falling prey to undo anxiety about the need for immediate success? Perhaps Jesus graciously anticipated...that there would be times when we would be less than invincible. Every home will not receive you. Every city will not listen to you. What then? When this happens, do not get uptight. Take your leave graciously. Shake the dust off your feet and move on."³

Perhaps such a sacrament can speak to us, and to the moment we find ourselves in. Is it not a corrective to the doctrinaire optimism that everywhere surrounds us? And is it not a corrective to the moment when doctrinaire optimism falls apart, opening toward chronic despair? The sacrament that Jesus instills in his followers teaches us to anticipate failure. But better yet, it also teaches us to carry on in spite of it.

There are several important lessons to be extracted from this text. The first is a graceful affirmation of human fallibility. You and I, we're not without limits. There are problems for which there may not be solutions. There are some things that are broken that simply cannot be fixed. Try as we might, we're not going to succeed at being friends with everybody. Despite our best efforts, we may rub someone the wrong way. Parents may do the right things and a child may still struggle mightily. A marriage may fail, despite the best intentions of both partners. Jesus's words help to save us from a burdensome perfectionism, one that is destructive to ourselves and to others. Instead of berating ourselves for our failures, a sacrament for the weary would provide us with the freedom to admit our fallibility and frailty, to acknowledge our failures, to trust in the power of forgiveness, and then to move on.

But there also exists in this text a warning against unrealistic expectations. Jesus seems to be saying, "You're going to succeed in some things, and fail in others." When things don't go well, it's not necessarily your fault. You're in charge of the effort, but not the outcome. Some days, no matter how hard you try, you are not going to succeed, no matter how skillful you are.

That's true of individual people, but it's also true of churches. There are those on our membership rolls who, it turns out, do not wish to be found by us. There are those who are not on our membership rolls – like those who enjoy posting comments about us in LymeLine! - who

³ In *To God Be the Glory*, Theodore A. Gill, editor (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1973), pgs. 146-147.

prefer to keep it that way. It happens. Our text invites us to be realistic in our expectations, and not always take it personally when people go a different way. But it's also true of programs, outreach, and ministries. Not every program is a winner. Not every project works. Not every mission partnership sees results – at least not results that can be measured in terms of success and failure. If that's true at the level of churches, how much more true is it of what happens in a town, or a city, or a state, or a country? Sometimes, things don't work out. Our text invites us to be gentle when that happens, neither doubling down on our optimism nor succumbing to cynicism and despair. Instead, the invitation is to keep moving, to shake the dust from our feet, and to keep on keeping on.

But finally, our sacrament for the weary suggests this: that when it comes to God, what matters is not ultimately success, but faithfulness. Let's be clear about what follows when one worships at the shrine of success. In truth, the past four years have been a grotesque demonstration of such worship, but it didn't begin in 2016, and it didn't, and won't, end in 2021. If succeeding is what counts most, then it follows that anything goes. If you're a student, you can, and probably should, cheat on standardized tests in order to get into the school of your choice. If you're a politician, you should distort your opponent's positions, and peddle lies about election results. If you're a producer for a news network, or you're generating content for a social media site, you should push whatever story gets the most attention, the most likes. If you're an athlete, you should do whatever it takes to give you an edge. If success is the shrine at which you worship, you should do whatever it takes to get ahead. Sadly, that's an ethos that's wreaking havoc upon our world, and upon many of our lives.

It is the witness of the gospel, and of Jesus himself, that success is not the issue. Faithfulness is. Here, as in all else, Jesus is our model. From beginning to end, from the temptations in the wilderness to the trial before Pilate, Jesus refuses to trade faithfulness for victory. At each and every critical juncture, he rejected success when it came at the cost of his integrity or his identity. That's because he trusted that in God's own way and in God's good time, his life would not be for naught and his work would not be in vain. He calls those who follow him to trust in the same: to worry less about our success or failure, and more about our faithfulness. We do what we can to the best of our ability, leaving the results in God's hands.

It's been a long year. It's been a long week, and it's brought its share of disappointments and outrages, frustrations, tragedies, and failures. The message that Jesus offered his disciples then and now is that it's ok to feel discouraged and weary. Things don't always turn out as we wish. But don't let that discouragement shift toward despair. Remain faithful. Keep doing the work. Trust that God is somehow still at work in the midst of it all.

As for *The Little Engine That Could*, it will no doubt continue to play a role in the lives of children and adults. A copy of the book sits on a shelf in our house, and I've made no plans to rid myself of it. Sometimes we need stories like that. But I also hope that our kids, that all of us, have other stories available to us as well. Stories that teach us not to be dismayed when failures or defeats or disappointments find us. Stories that teach us that it's not success and failure that matter most, but rather faithfulness and integrity that count.

So it is that I can say to you, you who have come through so much this year: Take heart. Shake the dust from your feet. Let's keep walking, in faith.