

It is good for us to be here

My sisters and brothers and others,

It is good for us to be here, amen?

It is good to be in this place together, listening to the Word of God.

It may just be a normal Sunday, but after over a month apart,

Just a normal Sunday feels like looking upon God's glory.

I feel like Jesus' disciples on the mountain.

You appear to me as Moses and Elijah, God's strong heroes,

Your clothes are dazzling, and I half expect to be enveloped

By the cloud of the Holy Spirit.

I just hope I don't say anything as dumb as Peter did in our story today.

Peter and James and John witness this intense miracle,

Of Jesus transfigured, glorified on the mountain.

They see him talking to Moses and Elijah,

The two most important figures in the Jewish scriptures.

As the scripture tells us, Peter didn't know what to say.

So he stammers out the first thing he thinks of,

"Master, it is good for us to be here;

Let's set up three tents, one for you, one for Moses, and one for Elijah."

Tents? Dwellings? Booths? Translators vary on their interpretation

Of the word σκηνάς, but the idea is the same.

It's a temporary shelter, like those the Israelites used in the wilderness.

I understand it to some extent.

Peter has just experienced probably the craziest, scariest, most intense

Moments of his whole life.

He's confused, he's excited, and his instinct is to freeze that moment

In time, to commemorate it somehow in physical form.

He wants a marker, a structure to make the experience tangible.

But really, Peter?

After this crazy miraculous experience, you really want

The Messiah and you and your buddies,

To scrounge up sticks and fabric and materials

In the dark of night on a mountain top

And build 3 tents?

Come on. It's a bad idea. It's cringe.

I have to imagine this idea is a moment that Peter

Would rather have had the Gospel writers forget.

But they don't.

All 3 of the Gospels that include this story of Jesus' transfiguration

Include Peter's cringey bad idea about the tents.

Sorry, Peter. Like your other stories of failure,

This one got preserved for 2000 years.

You know, I've never been a huge fan of Peter.

Probably because he pulled a sword and cut someone's ear off,

And I was taught from a young age that cutting off ears is wrong.

But maybe it's also because of the various stories in the Gospels

Where Peter fails.

Poor Peter.

Over and over in the Gospels, Peter fails.

He tries to walk on water, he fails.

He tries to stay awake in the garden while Jesus prays, he fails.

He is ready to defend Jesus with his sword,

But Jesus ends up dying in disgrace.

Mark even tells us about a time when Jesus called Peter Satan.

Our story today is just another example
Of Peter attempting to rise to the challenge of the moment,
And failing.

We see Peter fail time and again in the Gospels,
Which makes me think we should pay attention
To the stories that are not in the Gospels.

That is, let's look at all the things Jesus didn't say or do
In response to Peter's failures.

Jesus didn't fire Peter from the disciples, or send him home to Galilee.

Jesus didn't heap blame on Peter, shaming him in front of others.

Jesus didn't revoke Peter's name and call him Simon again,

And make some other disciple the new Peter,

The new rock on which to build his church.

Jesus rebukes Peter sometimes, but never punishes him.

I can't help but think that if we think of Peter not as a man,

But as a character in the story of Jesus,

His role is to teach us how Jesus responds to human failures,

To represent us and our own failures in the story.

Peter as a character gives us permission to fail, to screw up,

In the knowledge that Jesus still loves us and has big plans for us.

Peter and his failures teach us that the Kingdom of God

Is not a meritocracy, where status is achieved,

But a love-ocracy, where status is gifted to all of us.

In our society, we often glorify the idea of meritocracy.

We like to believe that those with power and wealth

Have done something to deserve it.

That belief helps us feel good about the wealth and power we have,
And keeps us from being angry that others have more
Because, well, they earned it.
We like the idea that our society is a meritocracy because
We feel it's certainly better than other societies,
Where power and wealth come from corruption or family inheritance.
We even think our society is powerful and wealthy
Because we deserve it,
Because we're a democracy, a meritocracy, a land of freedom.
It's a tempting idea, I'll admit.
But I never had much of a chance to believe in meritocracy.
My older sister Emily has an intellectual disability
And various physical disabilities.
She will never "achieve" anything according to society's standards.
There is no place in a meritocracy for Emily.
But as her brother, I've always known that God loves Emily.
I've always known instinctively that Emily has just as much value
As a human being as I do, as you do.
Emily taught me from the beginning of my life
That God's love is not something you earn or achieve,
Which means it's certainly not something you can lose by failing.
Jesus had a plan for Peter and for Emily,
And for North Goshen Mennonite church.
What I want us to take away from this story, from this sermon,
Is a sense of permission to fail.
I know that's a little hard to swallow because we take church so seriously,
We have so many emotions and so much history,

That we become anxious about failing, or acknowledging failure.
We fear that if we try something new and it goes wrong,
The whole thing might collapse around us.
So when that anxiety arises, remember how Jesus responded to Peter.
Remember that Jesus gave Peter opportunities and watched him fail,
And still elevated him to an important place among the disciples.
This concept of permission to fail
Is going to be absolutely crucial in our visioning process.
We have to be able to innovate, to try new things.
And to do that we have to accept that they might not work.
We might have to change the plan, revise our strategy.
And we don't need to be held back by failures in the past.
We may try things that have failed in the past,
But we're a different church now in a different world.
We have to avoid the responses to failure that Jesus avoided,
Blaming, shaming, rejecting, resenting.
When things go wrong, and things sometimes do,
Our response needs to be positive and encouraging.
Rather than focus on who screwed up and how terrible they are,
Let's figure out what led to the problem and try again.
I know a lady who had a child when she wasn't married.
Her mother was mortified and appalled.
The mother never let her forget about this "failure."
Every time something went wrong in the woman's life,
Her mother would trace it back to her premarital sins,
Until the mother had this idea in her head that her daughter was a failure,
That she had irrevocably screwed up her life.

But I know the daughter, and she's doing fine.
She has a good job and a stable relationship.
Her kids are struggling, but in normal teenage ways,
Not desperate or dangerous ways.
But in this mother's mind her daughter's failure,
Or perhaps her supposed failure as a mother,
Has permanently ruined her life.
I know another guy I used to work with.
Whenever anyone screwed up or failed at something,
He never said a word about it to the person.
Instead, he would write these lengthy, angry emails
To the person's supervisor to get them in trouble.
These two responses to failure are unfortunately common.
Blame is an easy game to play,
Whether we blame ourselves, our family members, or others.
Our instincts tell us to memorialize the moment, like Peter,
Calling everyone's attention to what someone else did,
Building a tent for their failure to live in.
But like Jesus and the disciples, we have more important work to do.
We need to give each other and ourselves permission to fail
Because in the end we value each other more than anything.
There's a saying I like that says, "Process over results."
It means stick to the process that works in the long run,
Even if the short-term results aren't good.
It's a saying that helps us not get caught up in our emotions
When we or others fail, and let the process unfold.
But there's a saying I like even better, which is "People over process."

It means that whatever work we are doing is less important
Than the way we value and treat one another.
That's how I want us to do our visioning work and everything else.
Church is important, and we want it to go smoothly.
But if we're not focused on loving and caring for each other,
Then what are we even doing here?
I'd rather pastor a church that fails at everything they try,
But loves each other like Jesus loved Peter,
Than a church where everything runs perfectly,
But doesn't have that love and care for each other.
Being back in this sanctuary today should hammer this point home,
That what matters in this church is the people,
That what brings us here is our love for God, yes,
But also our love for each other.
If we can remember that, we'll never really fail.
Amen.