

FAILING GRACE

Mark 6:7-12

Good News About Grace

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One of the most talked about, and remembered baseball legends of all time, is Babe Ruth. If you are a devoted baseball fan, or if you love baseball history, there is literally magic in that name. In his 22 big league seasons the Babe hit 714 homeruns and finished his career with a lifetime batting average of .342.

He began his career as a pitcher and is remembered for pitching 29 and 2/3rds scoreless innings in World Series play for the Boston Red Sox. Yes, he was amazing and you can see why there is literally magic in the name, Babe Ruth.

With all these tremendous statistics, however, it is seldom mentioned that Babe Ruth also struck out 1330 times. It is important to note here that 1330 times is not the record. Does anyone know who holds this record?

Yes, another great legend of baseball, Mickey Mantle, holds that record with 1710 strikeouts in his career. And yet nevertheless the fact that the great Babe Ruth went down swinging 1330 times is still a very significant statistic.

Why is this so significant? Because to a chronic bungler like myself; to someone who strikes out in life as much as I do; to someone like me who makes lots of mistakes it is very comforting to know that even Babe Ruth, one of the greatest homerun hitters in the history of sport, fanned the breeze 1330 times. He definitely knew how to fail.

I also believe it is very important to note that Jesus was concerned enough that his disciples understand failure that he spoke to them specifically about it. In our reading for today from Matthew's Gospel Jesus sends his disciples out into the world with very specific instructions.

He said, *"If any place will not welcome you or listen to you,"*—that is when you are trying to engage in ministry with people and you fail (they won't listen, they push you out)—when that happens then *"shake the dust off your feet when you leave, as a testimony against them."*

What Jesus was trying to do was to protect his disciples in advance from worrying about their failures. He knew very well that they would be anxious and upset when they would strike out—when they did not have the success they were hoping for.

So even before they went up to the plate for the first time, even before they went out and began preaching and witnessing about Jesus he told them, *"Don't fret over your failures, you are certainly going to have them. But just keep on keeping on."*

Now to me, my friends, that is a beautifully freeing and grace filled word—simply because I often fail in my life, in my ministry, in my leadership. It is really good to know that my God anticipates my failures, expects my failures, and through his amazing grace and forgiveness has already issued instructions on what to do after the third strike.

Once the Yankees crushed the Cardinals in four straight games in World Championship play; the year was 1928. Babe Ruth had been the star of the series hitting three homeruns in the final game alone. The Yankee train was on its way back to New York City and along the route thousands had turned out to cheer the champions.

About 2:00 A.M. one morning they paused to change engines in a small town in Illinois and the usual crowd was on hand with the usual cheer, "We want Babe! We want Babe!"

Well he came to the observation deck of the train dressed in his pajamas. When he waved his big hairy hand at the crowd they all went wild. Then Babe called for three cheers for the Yankees and the crowd obeyed.

Then he called for three cheers for Al Smith who was campaigning for the presidency of the U.S. and again the crowd obeyed. Then someone called out, "How about three cheers for the Cardinals?" the team they had just defeated.

The Babe obliged by calling for three cheers for the Cardinals. However before his adoring fans could respond with cheers he changed his mind. Babe waved his hand for silence and then he said, "No cheers for them, they quit!"

He didn't object to their losing, only to their quitting. There was no shame in striking out, he did that himself 1330 times. The only real shame was if you threw in the towel, gave up and never really went again to the plate.

My friends, I definitely need to remember that too. It really helps me in life when I recall that Jesus and his disciples had many times of failure; that the Apostle Paul and his missionary friend Barnabus failed many times; and that all people, even baseball legends fail.

And the really good news is that none of that comes as any surprise whatsoever to our God. The important thing is to recognize this, to allow his amazing grace to touch us, and to stand in there with all these failures ready for our next time at the plate.

It is easy, of course, to allow this fear of failure which we all share to cause us to give up, to be really afraid of venturing out with confident faith in Jesus. This seems to be the reason why so many today are reluctant to get involved in things where there may be a risk of controversy or failure involved.

Lots of people are content to remain neutral, to allow others to lead and stick their necks out, to remain as observers in the bleachers of life. Then, of course, if something does fail or doesn't go as planned they can conveniently blame it all on someone else.

This is one of the big reasons why it is so difficult today to find people who are willing to be leaders. Whether it be in Christ's church, in the community, in organizations, in schools, in our government it is difficult to lead and take the blame for any little thing that goes wrong.

And yet today we need to thank God for all those throughout the history of our world and of Christ's Church who have been willing to move forward with vision and leadership; those who have been willing to take risks, to stick their necks out, to lead even when the complainers and naysayers are trying to do everything they can to make them fail.

In the Christ Church most church buildings like this one would have never been built; most mission work and new ministries would have never been started; and most times of great awakening and renewal in the Holy Spirit would have never happened if it hadn't been for the people who were willing to boldly venture out in the name of Jesus—if it wasn't for those people who even when they failed kept on keeping on.

The great Christian leader and educator Henrietta Mears used to say, "Failure is not a sin...faithlessness is." In other words it is never a sin to venture out in bold faith and fail in your initiatives for the sake of Jesus Christ.

It is a sin, however, not to try. It is a sin to quit and not do anything. It is a sin to listen to the complainers, to not dare to risk in trying new things, to keep things lethargic and status quo. As Babe Ruth showed—there is no shame in striking out; the only shame is in never going to the plate—in hiding away from the challenge of possibly getting a hit.

Charlie Brown in the Peanuts cartoon captures, I believe, these feelings of failure we so often may have. Lucy is in the psychiatry business again, she is behind her little stand with a sign on it which reads, "Advice 5 cents." Charlie Brown becomes her first client.

"Lucy," he says, "I need your help." "What can I do for you, Charlie Brown?" "I'm confused," says Charlie, "I can't seem to find a direction, a purpose for my life."

Lucy responds, "Oh, don't worry Charlie. It's like being on a big ocean liner making its way through the sea. Some folks put their deck chairs to face the bow of the ship; some others place their chairs to face the side of the ship or the back of the ship. Which way do you face Charlie Brown?" Charlie responds sadly, "I can't even unfold my deck chair."

If any of us have experienced this kind of failure, this kind of low self image, Jesus says shake the dust off your feet and move on. This is the reason why I came Jesus tells us, that we might have life and have it more abundantly. May we allow the Holy Spirit to fill us with his amazing grace so we might be the people God intended for us to be.

The Apostle Paul says in Philippians 3:13-14, *"Forgetting what is behind and straining forward toward what is ahead, I press on toward the goal to win the prize for which God has called me heavenward in Christ Jesus."* Jesus is calling you and me to forget our failures and to press on for the sake of Jesus and his life transforming power.

The message of Jesus and his Gospel, my friends, is that you are all-star and championship material—that God loves you and that Jesus died for you. Allow God's amazing grace to touch you. Shake off the dust of failure from your feet and move on.

You are a potential homerun hitter—believe it. You are a real find. You are a joy in someone's heart. You are a jewel, unique and priceless. I don't care how you are feeling this morning—believe it. God's grace and love are for you!

It's like that person who said, "God don't make no junk!" And our God made, and is in the process of making, you.