

**KAILUA CHRISTIAN CHURCH**  
**Sunday, January 21, 2024**  
**Sermon: From Failure to Resilience**  
**Rev. Irene Willis Hassan**

**Scriptures:**

**Jonah 3:1-5, 10**

3 Then the word of the LORD came to Jonah a second time: 2 “Go to the great city of Nineveh and proclaim to it the message I give you.”

3 Jonah obeyed the word of the LORD and went to Nineveh. Now Nineveh was a very large city; it took three days to go through it. 4 Jonah began by going a day’s journey into the city, proclaiming, “Forty more days and Nineveh will be overthrown.” 5 The Ninevites believed God. A fast was proclaimed, and all of them, from the greatest to the least, put on sackcloth.

10 When God saw what they did, how they turned from their evil ways, God changed his mind about the calamity that he had said he would bring upon them, and he did not do it.

**Mark 1:14-20**

**14** Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee proclaiming the good news[a] of[b] God **15** and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near;[c] repent, and believe in the good news.”[d]

**16** As Jesus passed along the Sea of Galilee, he saw Simon and his brother Andrew casting a net into the sea, for they were fishers. **17** And Jesus said to them, “Follow me, and I will make you fishers of people.” **18** And immediately they left their nets and followed him. **19** As he went a little farther, he saw James son of Zebedee and his brother John, who were in their boat mending the nets. **20** Immediately he called them, and they left their father Zebedee in the boat with the hired men and followed him.

**Sermon: From Failure to Resilience**

I lived in a Service Learning Community in Northern Ireland at a Christian center called Corrymeela Community for 3 months of 2010. It remains to have been one of the most impactful experiences of my life for many reasons that I can talk about more later, but today I’m going to talk about the frustration of that experience.

If you don’t know much about Irish history, Northern Ireland separated itself from Southern Ireland over religious identity. Northern Ireland is predominantly Protestant, and Southern Ireland predominantly Catholic, and they’re literally two different countries because of this ideological divide. The center that I lived at purposefully brought together youth from both Protestant and Catholic communities to have a safe space to discuss their differences and find reconciliation to promote a healthier, united future for Ireland.

The bubble of our Service Learning Community, which was in a remote cliffside town along the Irish sea, seemed like a haven. There was love, and deep expressions of

solidarity and hope, and a sense of a transformational future for the young people who served there. The scene of historically warring factions laughing and playing together on a hillside of the Irish sea was beautiful and forever etched as a happy place in my mind.

So here's the frustrating part. One weekend in July, I was invited by one of my Irish friends to come stay at his home in The Shankle neighborhood of Belfast for what he called "The 11th Day Parade." I thought that sounded fun and interesting, I mean who doesn't love a good parade?

It turns out it wasn't a parade like what you might think a parade should be at all. Just like in Israel-Palestine, there's a 25-foot partition wall that runs through The Shankle in Belfast. It separates the minority Catholic community from the Protestant community and is covered with graffiti that ranges from calls to violence to hopes for peace. At this parade, where I was on the Protestant side of the wall, they had built dozens of huge pallet towers that were taller than the wall covered in images of the Pope and other Catholic iconography. At sundown, they lit all these huge pyres on fire and celebrated with machine guns shooting in the air as the smoke drifted over the wall into the Catholic neighborhood. And that is the annual 11th Day Parade, a festival to ridicule and intimidate their neighbors. I didn't sleep at all that night.

The frustration was that I had just spent the last several months watching beautiful interactions between the youth of these two groups. From the limited vantage point of that cliffside community in the country, it seemed that all was well and peaceful for the future of Ireland. Then the stark reality of continued hatred came crashing down around me when I saw the reality of what was happening in Belfast just a few miles away.

What was the point to what we were doing at Corrymeela if the atmosphere of hate was still so insurmountable in the wider community? What was the point, if the message of love and unity under Jesus was only contained in the walls of that center and did nothing to impact the outside world, why were they doing it at all?

Our friend Jonah from the Bible suffered a similar crisis of faith. He did everything God asked him for, even if it took a little coercing with the whole whale incident. In the end, God decided not to destroy Nineveh after all, which made Jonah feel like all his effort was for naught. Jonah 4 explains that in response, Jonah felt angry about the situation to the point of wanting to die.

Sometimes things we do in life, that we thought God wanted from us, end up not being at all like we hoped they'd be. The story of Jonah is the story of how it feels to fail in the work that God calls us into.

The problem Jonah had in Nineveh, and the problem I had in Northern Ireland, is that we failed to affect the change we thought God was calling us into. I left Northern Ireland, and I'm sure that many years later that wall is still there, covered in images of war and violence. I'm sure they still host the "11th Day Parade" in The Shankle and choke out the Catholics every July. My presence in that place did nothing to affect that situation,

just as Jonah's presence in Nineveh didn't result in the dramatic meltdown of the ruling city that he thought it would.

In the story from Mark, Jesus also suffered a failure. The story we read today from the New Testament begins with his cousin John being arrested, which we know will soon result in his beheading. That must not have been an easy part of the journey for Jesus, to have his parallel miracle birth cousin snuffed out of the story before they even really got started. I sometimes wonder if Jesus experienced a crisis of faith in that moment, like all of us who experience failure in the thing that we thought was ordained by God.

Unlike Jonah, Jesus doesn't curse the mission and wish for death in that moment of failure. Instead, he proclaims that the next phase of the mission is at hand – to repent and make fishers of men.

One of the greatest benefits of belief in God is trust that God will make beauty from our stories even at the times that we cannot see it. God will never stop building his Kingdom of endless peace and joy, even and especially in the face of failure and doubt.

Exemplified in Jesus, God is asking for our resilience. He's asking for us to trust in Him that the story will unfold as it should as long as we trust him through the process. It may not happen the way we expect it, and we will likely experience failure along the way, but God does not fail and He will complete His mission through us if we just keep going.

I didn't change Northern Ireland, but Northern Ireland changed me. Northern Ireland was my first experience submersed in a culture and collective story that was different from the one I grew up with. The path of having that world opened up to me led me to ministry in Israel/Palestine, Syria, Jordan, and now Hawaii. My presence in that community didn't change Northern Ireland, but it did provide a ripple effect of expanding my capacity to proclaim the coming of the Kingdom of God in the new worlds I experienced after.

Corrymeela Community doesn't need its Service Learning Community because it believes those individual participants will successfully change the trouble in Northern Ireland in the short timespans that they're there. Corrymeela Community needs its Service Learning Community so it can create that ripple effect of hope, love, and empowerment in its participants to go out in the world and proclaim the coming of the Kingdom.

Unfortunately, Jonah's story ends with a question mark, in which Jonah doesn't seem to see his failed experience as part of a ripple effect of him being empowered into new ministry. But Jesus did. Jesus understood that failure is only failure for humans, because God doesn't fail. And Jesus' trust in the process God created through Him resulted in changing the whole world forever.

We're going to experience failures in life. We're going to experience failures in the church. We can't be like Jonah and give up at the first sign of trouble; we're expected to be like Jesus and look for the new path God is opening for us after our failure.

The key pivot in the road from failure to resilience is repentance. This is the first thing Jesus asked us to do after John was arrested – repent. Repentance is the evaluation of our failures, what role we played in them, and how we can do better next time. It's a necessary pause for reflection between events. As we prepare to move into the Lenten season of reflection, and the transitional season of our church moving from past mistakes to rebuilding a future, now is the time to take that pause for reflection and repentance so that we are empowered for the next part of our journey.

I returned from Ireland in August of 2010, and spent the next 5 months journaling, praying, and fasting in reflection of my experience. I talked with God about the failure of my time at Corrymeela Community to affect real change in the troubles of Northern Ireland, and like Jonah, lamented what the purpose was. I asked God to show me what I was meant to become from that experience. In January of 2011, I then embarked on my first mission trip to Israel/Palestine, this time with more knowledge and understanding of my context there and what I did and didn't have the power to change, and that second international trip has now become an integral part of what my career and family became.

God builds on the ministry and strength of those who repent after failure and commit to trying again anew. Let us move into a time of repentance and reflection in this upcoming Lenten season so that we may be better prepared for the next part of the journey of where God is taking us.

Amen.