

“Lord, Are We Able?”

Matthew 21:1-11, Isaiah 50:4-9a, Philippians 2:5-11

Palm Sunday, March 29, 2026

Woodbury United Methodist Church, Woodbury, Connecticut

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It was the best graduation speech I’ve ever heard.

This is no small thing, for I have heard many good ones. Top marks go to actor Alan Alda who spoke at Drew Theological School almost 50 years ago. Mr. Alda gained fame as Dr. Hawkeye Pierce in the T.V. series “M.A.S.H.” He challenged us with the ethical question, “How much will you take to put poison in the reservoir?” and then exhorted us to be mindful of the ethical compromises we are all tempted to make “because it’s only a little thing and won’t hurt anyone.”

But, for me, on June 14th, 2017 at Amity Regional High School, Eric Greenbaum out did him. Who is Eric Greenbaum? Glad you asked. Eric was a classmate of our son Ryan, a member of the Class of 2017, along with over 300 graduating seniors from Amity. Many of these were already high performing students with significant achievements. So often such speeches are either naïve or self-congratulatory, taking the form of “every day in every way you’re getting better and better.”

Eric would have none of it. Instead, he told his classmates humorously, honestly and directly “You’re going to fail.” He then shared several of his epic failures, to the laughter and applause of his classmates who recognized, as the late Gilda Radnor said so succinctly, “Humor is truth, only faster.”

So on this Palm Sunday, as we stand at the entrance of Holy Week, with palm fronds waving, the shouts of “Hosanna!” echoing in our ears, Luke Shay’s Confirmation vows affirmed with all the love in our hearts, and us singing lustily “*Lord, we are able, our spirits are thine....*”, it is incumbent upon us to remember, even if unpleasant to do so, “*You’re going to fail.*” Me, too.

We wish it were otherwise, with all the aspirational fervor we can muster. No one **wants** to fail. Yet often in the American context, failure is seen as not just mistakes made and lessons learned, but an intrinsic collapse of our very identity. Our culture’s message is, in many ways, “If you fail, you’re nobody.” Years ago I learned that my “*striving after perfection,*” to use a phrase from our Wesleyan ordination vows, was for me less about the love of God and more about earning my salvation. In that pursuit, it became easy to remember my achievements and absent-minded about my shortcomings.

Life and time and experience have a way of correcting such distorted self-assessment. I've told you more than once that in me you do not get a perfect pastor. That's a guarantee, though one I'd prefer not to make.

In the bigger picture of Holy Week, it points us to the fickle crowds on Palm Sunday, the uncertainty of the disciples, the denial by Peter and the betrayal by Judas. Each underscores a painful reality: we are going to fail.

While work schedules and the general tendency of Protestants to go from Palm Sunday straight to Easter—from the glory of the triumphant entry to the glory of the empty tomb—while that tendency keeps us away from Maundy Thursday and Good Friday worship, I think entering Christ's passion—seeing ourselves in the story—also is a challenge to our willingness to attend. It is easy and painful to see how we could be the fickle crowd, the uncertain disciples, and even deny and betray our Lord.

In our Monday Lenten study, "*Why Did Jesus Have to Die?*", we have explored ten theories of the atonement: how Christ's suffering on the cross redeems us. No one theory explains it all, and different theories will speak to us in different stages of our discipleship and life journey. What I do know is this: I'm going to fail, and only a Savior can redeem me. If I could redeem myself, I would. I can't. Neither can you. Exactly how Christ's death on the cross does that is a source of debate, but that it does so is affirmed in multiple scriptures from multiple writers. It's a bit like saying that before we understood modern nutrition, our mothers and fathers told us to eat our vegetables.

This is not just a pitch for you to be in worship this Thursday and Friday. It is rather a plea to enter Jesus' passion in its fullness: the depth and breadth and heights to which he would go to redeem us because he knew we would fail.

So as we sing "*Lord, we are able,*" it must always be sung knowing that it is aspirational and not descriptive. It must always be in the light of our closing hymn by the Rev. Samuel Wesley, father of John and Charles, who wrote:

*Behold the Savior of mankind nailed to the shameful tree;
How vast the love that him inclined to bleed and die for thee!*

In fact, as our Bell Choir concludes our service with the tune *Herzliebster Jesu* I will invite you to follow the lyrics in Hymn #289, "*Ah, holy Jesus.*" The second verse is the heart of the matter:

*“Who was the guilty? Who brought this upon thee?
Alas, my treason, Jesus, hath undone thee!
’Twas I, Lord Jesus, I it was denied thee; I crucified thee.”*

If all this is true, who can be saved?

The good news is “all of us!” Whatever we’ve done or failed to do that has grieved Christ’s heart of love is not enough to separate us from God and one another. And because we are forgiven of our sin, we can have the gumption to get up and try again. And that’s a good thing, because when failure intimidates us, we’ll never try to do anything of substance, including being a disciple of Jesus. I’ll say that again: If we allow failure to intimidate us, we will never try to do anything of substance, including being a disciple of Jesus.

Quick show of hands for our handy folks: how many of you have ever ignored the carpenter’s rule “measure three times and cut once” and cut ½ inch more than you should have off a 2” x 4”? Me, too! Most researchers support the thesis that those who have accomplished great things have failed more than they succeeded. Although we are in the midst of March Madness, baseball season is close at hand. The greatest baseball hitters fail in two out of every three attempts. Yet a .333 batting average—which is what failing two out of every three times is called—is usually indicative of Hall of Fame status. Most musicians will smile knowingly in hearing the counsel of my late high school band director, Raymond Griffith, who used to tell us, “If you’re going to make a mistake, make it loud!!

So, Lord, are we able? No. We cannot save ourselves. Only Christ can do that. Jesus elsewhere reminds us that when we are weary and carrying heavy burdens – and that includes failure and fear of failure – he will give us rest. To take his yoke upon us – of service, of care for others, of compassion – is to learn of Christ, gentle and humble in heart. In so doing we find rest for our souls and find him carrying the burden we cannot carry alone.

His love enables us to give our best as his disciples; to risk failure without fear of failure; to be the Church that Christ called into being, built on the very rock—the apostle Peter—who denied him. It is that mercy and love of Jesus that keeps us moving forward. It enables us to face the worst in a world that crucifies a Savior and the worst in ourselves that denies and betrays a Savior. And that, the mercy and love of Jesus, gives us confidence in the hope of redemption: that *“nothing can separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.”* Amen.