

Spectacular failures

At church, the loser appears right above the altar.

by [Barbara Brown Taylor](#) in the [February 22, 2005](#) issue



St. Benedict's Abbey, Atchison, Kansas. [Some rights reserved](#) by [Randy OHC](#).

When I visit art museums, I always reward myself with a trip to the gift shop at the end. I may not be able to afford any of the masterpieces that I have seen on display, but I can take away some postcards or a souvenir booklet to refresh my memory. On my last visit to the High Museum of Art in Atlanta, I was standing in line at the cash register with a box of Van Gogh note cards in my hand when I saw a clear glass bowl full of smooth silver pebbles on the counter. Each was about as big as my thumb,

with one word etched into its surface. Even without touching them, I could see one that said “hope” and another that said “love.”

I had a recently widowed friend who could use some pebbles like that, so I sank my hand in the bowl to see what else I might fish up. “Tears,” said the next pebble. “Loss,” said the next. Well, I thought, my friend already has enough of those, so I put them back and kept fishing. I found a couple of gratitudes, along with a few more hopes and loves, but only by looking hard. Over and over, I brought up whole handfuls of tears and loss, which outnumbered the other pebbles by at least 20 to one. Everyone had enough of those, apparently, or wanted nothing to do with them. Why pay good money for something that life pelts you with for free?

I discovered one “forgiveness” in the bottom of the bowl, which told me what the bestseller had been. Pushing all the other pebbles aside, I plucked it up and laid it on the counter with hope, love and gratitude. Then I looked back at all the tears and loss left in the bowl and thought maybe that was part of the problem—that no one wanted to own them—so I chose one of each and added them to my collection.

I felt almost cruel giving them to my friend, but her sad mouth softened when she saw them. She may not have wanted them, but she knew they were hers, and seeing them in her hand with all the others told her story better than the edited version I first had in mind. “Tears” belonged next to “love,” and “hope” took on more luster when nestled against “loss.” “Gratitude” was no longer a platitude and “forgiveness” had something major to forgive. Holding all of the pebbles together in one hand turned out to be exactly what she needed.

When Christians talk about what the church has to offer the world, one thing we do not often mention is an adequate theology of failure. Like everyone else, we live in a culture that adores success, and that never seems to tire of raising the bar. Being a successful human being means making straight A’s, keeping a well-paid job with good benefits, staying happily married to an attractive person, raising well-adjusted children, and not gaining too much weight. Judging from the commercials on television, being successful also means driving a hot car, carrying a cool cell phone, having young-looking skin and choosing the right medicine to beat depression for good.

This leaves a lot of room to fail. But the same culture that creates these conditions for failure is not equipped to deal with it. The most readily available therapy comes

in the form of reality shows, where we may gawk at those whose hunger for success leads all but one of them to fail—spectacularly—right where we can see them. Better for the losers to show up on the television screen than in the mirror, eh?

At church, the loser shows up right above the altar. If success was ever on his list of things to do, then it was not the kind that anyone around him had much use for. Once, in the presence of large crowds, he blessed the poor in spirit, the mournful, the hungry and the reviled. Some of the people who fell into those categories no doubt wished he had done something to improve their conditions instead of saying grace over them, but I am guessing that there were others who were vastly relieved to hear that there was nothing deeply wrong with them. If Jesus was right, then they did not have to leave their tears and losses in the bowl. They could hold all of their pebbles together in one hand.

I go to church to remember this—not to hear about the victory of the cross but to be reminded that there is no shame in failure at the foot of the cross. Why is the word so hard to say? Failure brings me down to earth that is solid beneath my feet. Failure links my broken heart to others just like it. Failure delivers me into the everlasting arms, where I find the solace that eluded me in my success.

This is such good news that I cannot hear it often enough. Sometimes I have to listen really hard, especially when the hymns are full of triumph, the preacher is flawless and the bulletin offers me a dozen ways to become a better Christian, but as long as there is a cross in view I can usually resist these enticements to spiritual success.

Jesus was not pretending while he was hanging there. He really did lose everything, buying up all the tears and loss that no one else wanted. Because he did, I can at least hold my own in my hand, trusting that when I am feeling my most hurt and futile, my most abandoned by God, I am not far from him but as close as I can get, poised to fail—spectacularly—in my own bid for true and lasting life.