

Failure in Full View
Mark 6: 1–13
Wake Forest Baptist Church
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July 5, 2009

Have you ever experienced one of those moments in time when it seems that every possible thing that could have gone wrong in a particular circumstance has actually gone wrong? When the biggest possible mess was generated by a few random events that conspired to take place within moments of the others?

An example. It's early morning, and you've awakened from a restful night of sleep, eager for that first cup of coffee or tea, or whatever beverage your body requires to get moving in the morning. You trudge to the kitchen to get the necessary morning brew, which in my case is always coffee – black. While waiting for the coffee to finish brewing, you head out to get the newspaper, returning to a house that is beginning to take on the aroma of fresh-perked coffee. The birds are singing, the sun is shining, there's low humidity; ah, the beginnings of a perfect day.

Back in the kitchen, you pour that first cup of coffee, clutch it in one hand and the newspaper in the other, and turn to head toward your favorite reading spot. And that's when the first and perhaps best known of Murphy's many laws intrudes upon your day: If anything can go wrong, it will.

Because upon turning away from the counter, you find that the foot you just lifted to take a step has been impeded by a large-bodied cat, who, playfully, has grabbed for your slippers and successfully stopped the motion of the foot you will need to get to the floor quickly if you are to keep your balance.

Because your foot is not moving quickly enough to the floor, your body begins to tip forward, with the arms naturally extending – as if to break a fall! However, as both hands are full, and you are falling, the brain sends the signal to release everything from your grasp, even as you are trying to send an alternate signal that doing so will create even more havoc. A second law of Murphy becomes clear: If there is a possibility of several things going wrong, the one that will cause the most damage will be the **FIRST** to go wrong.

Because the cat, now sensing that something is wrong, has attempted to move away from you in great haste, and is now in perfect position for being doused by the bubbling hot coffee you just poured, from the cup which your brain has already signaled your hand to release. In horror, you see the stream of liquid find its mark. The cat, believing it has now been relieved of one of its nine lives, delivers a yell that brings blood to the ears of every creature within a one-mile radius, thereby alerting the dog that something is afoot that might require its attention.

Because being a faithful companion, the dog has been sitting nearby in the vain hope that you were going to prepare food before drinking your first cup of coffee. Experience has taught the dog that food sometimes falls from the counter, and it pays to be prepared. The conflagration suggests to the dog that something has happened, and so said dog now arrives on the scene, only to realize, too late, that food is NOT what is being dropped.

Because the first thing the dog sees is the newspaper – and a cat - hurtling through the air, and with a yelp, the dog tries to flee the scene. This brings us to Murphy's Law of Thermodynamics: Things get worse under pressure.

Because the kitchen floor is linoleum, the dog miscalculates the speed at which an exit can take place, thereby remaining in exactly the same spot even while furiously trying to gain traction, still watching the newspaper and scalding, squalling cat coming at full speed – with a surprised-looking human not far behind.

Because while the other events have been taking place, balance has not been regained, and while the hands are now empty, there is the task of trying to fall in a way that will not take another of the cat's lives, or the only life of the dog, or remove the face of the human since the fall is bringing the body ever closer to an encounter with the dinette set. This brings us to one of Murphy's laws on gravity: A falling object will always land where it can do the most damage.

Because the coffee cup, after scalding the cat with its contents, has, instead of landing on the relatively soft linoleum, remained airborne to strike the less-forgiving refrigerator exterior, shattering into a million, shiny, sharp, shards. The cat - fur still smoking - has collided with the dog, who now believes a rib or two has been fractured and begins to wail, stopping only when you finally land on the dinette set with a resounding thud, followed by a low groan. This brings us to a final law of Murphy: When you see the light at the end of the tunnel, the tunnel will cave in.

Because even though it seemed nothing else could go wrong, well, refer to rule 1, above. The large glass bowl of fruit that had been sitting in the middle of the dinette table, having been dislodged by the body landing on the table, found its way, first to your body, and then, still airborne, to the still unforgiving exterior of the refrigerator, surrendering its shape to become another mountain of shiny, sharp shards.

It's enough to make you want to go back to bed and try starting over again. While this exact scenario may not have played out in your homes, I'm sure you've experienced similar things, particularly those of you who have raised children! I'm sure there's a whole section of Murphy's Laws devoted to children and objects thrown into toilets, and if there is not, one of you should write them!

We've all been in situations where things have gone awry in ways big and small. When they happen in private, we are very thankful for not having to relive the moment through the descriptions – and perhaps raucous laughter – of others. But occasionally we fail in full view, and the results are often far from funny.

Our text today tells us that because of what was happening to him in his hometown, Jesus was not able to do deeds of power there. But this was not Jesus' first time dealing with a public event gone wrong. Back in Chapter 3, Jesus' own family had hoped to find him and restrain him, because people were saying Jesus was out of his mind based upon the teaching and healing he had been doing. Now, the people of his hometown are threatening him, though the reasons why are a bit vague.

Sometimes we can get clues on meaning from how other gospel writers recorded the same story. In Matthew, Jesus also teaches in the synagogue, and gets questioned similarly to the way Mark records. It seems that the people are mad that one of their own, and a craftsman's son at that, would dare come to teach them, for how could he be such a great teacher given his humble beginnings? How could anything great come for a carpenter's son?

Luke's account makes it likely that it was also the content of his teaching that drew the ire of those in the synagogue. But Mark's account doesn't focus on Jesus' teaching, and it differs in some ways that I think help us determine what message he was trying to send to his audience.

Here, Jesus says that prophets are not only dishonored in their hometown, but also among their own kin – and even in their own house. It is a deeper level of dishonor than expressed by Matthew or Luke, encompassing the one area of the world where pretty much everyone knows you; the town where you were born, where all your relatives live, and the home you share with the closest of your relatives. And it doesn't hurt as much when we fail around folks who don't even know us, but when it's the people closest to you, the pain can be unbearable.

Maybe the people who knew Jesus best were upset or jealous that one of their own would attempt to lead them and teach them; that's certainly what most commentators believe. But the positioning of this story in Mark's gospel is also different from Matthew and Luke in that it next moves to the sending of the disciples into the countryside, a story that Matthew and Luke place at other times.

Why, then, did Mark pair these two incidents? I think John Crossan may be onto something when he suggests that the real problem for the family and hometown folks was that they weren't seeing any value *for themselves* in what Jesus was doing. They wanted something out of Jesus' fame and notoriety, being the home folks, after all. Because this was not the first time in Mark's gospel where Jesus had come home during his ministry, nor the first time the home crowd had a chance to hear him teach (e.g. Mark 1:21, 3:1, 3:19b ff). Mark follows this failure around the home folks with Jesus sending the disciples out on their own, taking nothing to sustain them. The juxtaposition may suggest that the folks at home *wanted* to take something from Jesus, or expected that he would somehow give to them things that would sustain them and make their lives easier.

Said another way, Jesus wasn't focusing all his considerable time and talent on the folks back home, and that may have riled them up a bit. Though our translation suggests the crowd took offence at Jesus, the Greek word used there gives us the English

word *scandalized*; they were scandalized by the deeds of power Jesus was doing elsewhere. Perhaps they believed that there was only so much power to go around, and that by using it for helping others, it meant there would be less for them. If that was their feeling, Jesus immediately sending out the disciples to do the same deeds elsewhere would have been a lesson to the townspeople that there were no limits on power as long as people were willing to be hospitable and welcome the disciples.

Because his own hometown was unwelcoming of him, Jesus had failed in full view of the people who presumably knew him best, being able to heal only a few in contrast to the many he had helped elsewhere.

Life in community can be daunting, and the communal life of a congregation is no exception. We are constantly being called on to negotiate our lives together on days when we may have physical ailments, emotional difficulties, or economic concerns weighing on us as individuals. As a congregation, we are called on to negotiate our lives together on days when we may have concerns about the future, and deep worries about potential changes. It could be easy to miss the bigger picture in our need to resolve situations that leave our individual and communal lives feeling chaotic.

God calls us to community because we cannot survive well by being lone rangers. We need each other if we are to be able to live powerful lives of service in answer to God's call. We must hold each other up and build each other up rather than find reasons for tearing down or pushing away, and thereby limiting our individual and communal power. Each person brings her/his own strengths and weaknesses, abilities and liabilities, to this community, and we are called to practice hospitality – not only to the strangers in our midst – but to the friends we know well, for it is sometimes easier to denigrate or fail to appreciate those who are closest to us.

In a few moments, you will be invited to practice one of our rites of communal living by coming down to a common table to share a simple meal, a meal instituted by Jesus to remind us that he is with us always, and that we need not be afraid. Wake Forest Baptist Church welcomes all visitors here to this table, and it also welcomes to the table those for whom this church is already a family. As you come this morning, don't be hesitant to acknowledge the people around you in line; our time at table is meant to be a time of celebration as we gather as God's beloved community. If you are unable to come forward, one of our deacons will gladly serve you at your seat.