

“I’d Like to Hear a Sermon About: Failure”
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 Old Stone Presbyterian Church ~ Lewisburg, West Virginia
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Luke 22: 54 - 62

⁵⁴ Then they seized him and led him away, bringing him into the high priest’s house. But Peter was following at a distance. ⁵⁵ When they had kindled a fire in the middle of the courtyard and sat down together, Peter sat among them. ⁵⁶ Then a servant-girl, seeing him in the firelight, stared at him and said, “This man also was with him.” ⁵⁷ But he denied it, saying, “Woman, I do not know him.” ⁵⁸ A little later someone else, on seeing him, said, “You also are one of them.” But Peter said, “Man, I am not!” ⁵⁹ Then about an hour later still another kept insisting, “Surely this man also was with him; for he is a Galilean.” ⁶⁰ But Peter said, “Man, I do not know what you are talking about!” At that moment, while he was still speaking, the cock crowed. ⁶¹ The Lord turned and looked at Peter. Then Peter remembered the word of the Lord, how he had said to him, “Before the cock crows today, you will deny me three times.” ⁶² And he went out and wept bitterly.

I don’t know if you are aware of it, but failure is big these days. REALLY big.

Employers, committees, all over are talking about failure not only as something that is inevitable, but something that should be encouraged, because those that don’t fail didn’t try.

One company, Engineers Without Borders, even publishes their annual failure report, alongside this explanation:¹

EWB believes that success in development is not possible without taking risks and innovating – which inevitably means failing sometimes. We also believe that it’s important to publicly celebrate these failures, which allows us to share the lessons more broadly and create a culture that encourages creativity and calculated risk taking.

If you go the TED talks website and search failure, you’ll find a whole catalog of talks and videos about the topic.²

But... I can’t help but think that the pendulum hasn’t swung a bit too far. Failure isn’t, after all, our goal. It is, after all, still failing.

In honor of his 41st birthday, a friend gave professional skateboarder Bret Anthony Johnson a video- a video charting his “four-year quest to land something called a 360 varial in which you launch above the lip of a ramp, spin the board a full rotation, catch it

¹ Engineers Without Borders Canada - Ingénieurs Sans Frontières Canada
 “Failure Reports,” <http://legacy.ewb.ca/en/whoweare/accountable/failure.html> Retrieved October 10, 2013

² <https://www.ted.com/search?q=failure>

with your lead hand and pull it back under you before re-entry.” For every fall in the video, there were hundreds that weren’t included; still hundreds more weren’t filmed at all. And how many were included? The video is 8 minutes, 43 seconds of Johnston doing nothing but falling off of his skateboard, 160 times.³

Of course, without failure, Johnston would never have gotten where he wanted to go. He would never have mastered the trick.

But is it the failure that is good
or, finally, the success?

I can’t speak for the person who asked me to preach about failure, because I don’t know what motivated their question, but it seems to me that how we look at failure, Biblically, depends on the circumstances.

We read today about the failure of Peter to claim Jesus. Three times the night after Jesus was arrested, Peter denied Jesus. It was a night when claiming Jesus might have led to his own arrest and death. A night when the whole world had been turned around. Still, Peter denied Jesus. Three times. Exactly as Jesus said he would. Yes. Peter failed, but it doesn’t seem to have been a fatal failure, or one for which there were too many consequences beyond the shame of knowing what he had done, because Peter goes on to become the one Jesus chooses to be the rock upon which the church is built.

It’s not the only failure in the Bible, of course. Adam and Even fail to follow God’s instructions and eat of the fruit of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, and they suffer the consequence of being cast out of Eden.

Jacob fails to respect the laws of birth order and tricks his father out of blessing and an inheritance, and for that failure he must leave home.

Aaron helps the people build a golden calf.

Moses takes credit for the water that comes from the rock.

Jonah doesn’t go where God tells him to go.

David has a man put to death so he can marry the man’s wife.

And then there’s my favorite passage to preach during stewardship season, in the book of Acts, we are told the story of Ananias and Sapphira, who sell their property, but lie about the sale price in order to keep some of the money for themselves. The consequence for this failure? They fall down dead.

³ “Letter of Recommendation: Falling,” by Bret Anthony Johnston, The New York Times, December 2, 2015 http://www.nytimes.com/2015/12/06/magazine/letter-of-recommendation-falling.html?_r=0

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So, the best I can extrapolate, in the Bible, failure is not necessarily a sin. What makes the difference is your intent, and the way God is present in your actions. The disciples are told to proclaim the word of God to the people, but they are also told that if the people fail to listen they themselves are not to blame, they should shake the dust off of their sandals and move on.

Jonah goes the other way, but he does not deny God, and so he is given a chance for redirection via the whale.

Aaron, on the other hand, challenges God's place. As does Moses and David. They have severe consequences for their actions.

And isn't it somewhat similar in life?

Failure isn't necessarily a sin. It's proceeding as though God is irrelevant or unnecessary where we go awry.

I don't know if you read about this, but Benedict Cumberbatch (indisputably one of the best actors of this generation), foiled a mugging yesterday.⁴ He and his wife were in a car when he saw four individuals trying to steal a bicycle- a bicycle being ridden by a man who wanted to keep his bicycle. Cumberbatch stopped, intervened, and helped save both the man and his bicycle. Had Mr. Cumberbatch failed in his attempt, would it have been wrong to try? Of course not.

When I was in the 10th grade I had a math teacher who wasn't very nice and, quite frankly, wasn't a very good teacher. And so, I failed his class. I'm sure he learned a valuable lesson from my failure. Was that failure wrong? It sure was, because I chose failure rather than using the gifts God had given me.

Our own Rebekah Conn Foster wrote and posted these words a few years ago:

"I wish I knew then what I know now' is a game we all play from time to time. It's right up there with spending lottery winnings or having super powers. It's the time machine - to go back and right a wrong, or take another path.....

Maybe the piece of advice I could impart to the earlier version of me is this: when life presents you with choices, make one. Even if it's the wrong decision, it's better to make the decision yourself, than to have it made for you.

One of my all-time favorite quotes is from the French novelist, Colette: "You're going to do foolish things, but do them with enthusiasm." Do things well. Do things terribly. Do things! Make mistakes. Make choices."

And our own confessions confirm that kind of advice.

⁴ <https://www.npr.org/sections/thetwo-way/2018/06/02/616435888/sherlock-star-benedict-cumberbatch-saves-cyclist-from-muggers>

The Church is the body of Christ. Christ gives to the Church all the gifts necessary to be his body. The Church strives to demonstrate these gifts in its life as a community in the world:

The Church is to be a community of faith, entrusting itself to God alone, even at the risk of losing its life.⁵

So, is failure a good thing? It depends.

If you fail doing what God wants, calls, has created you to do, then I think yes. The trying was worth the failure.

But, if you aren't doing what God wants, calls, has created you to do, the that is a failure in and of itself. Whether born of fear or obstinance, failure is, in this case, un-faithful.

You know those fears that can keep us from doing what we are called and created to do, right?

Hedging our bets, because we're afraid God won't really be enough.
The fear that urges us to the center rather than playing at the edges.

And so, faithful failure might be something with which we should get more comfortable.

Not to seek failure, but neither to fear it, and to allow that fear to restrict us to the sidelines.

If failure were taken off of the table, what do you think God would want Old Stone Presbyterian Church to do?

What do you think God would want you to do?

Whatever it is, let's not let fear of failure get in the way, and remember, that Peter may have denied Jesus, but he didn't cease to be loved and called by God.

And the same is true of us. For in a few moments, it won't be just some of us who are invited to the meal at Christ's table. it will be all of us. The meek and the bold, the foolish and the faithful, the failures and the winners. All.

Thanks be to God. Amen.

⁵ Presbyterian Church (U.S.A.) Book of Order, Part II of the Constitution, 2011- 2013.
F-1.0301, "The Church Is the Body of Christ."