



Who's afraid of ... failure?

Church of the Spirit, Kingstowne January 25, 2009

Introduction: The world is full of a lot of successful people who at one time failed. And then there are those of us who are less successful in life, but have failed just as much. Indeed, failure would seem to be a constant in life no matter who you are. No one gets perfect scores, in everything, all the time. So, you'd think by now it would seem obvious to each of us that in order to be good at anything, you have to learn from your mistakes, you have to try and fail, and try again and fail, and keep on trying. Failure is not an enemy. It's how you learn. Perhaps that's why one famous company had as their slogan, "*Anything worth doing right is worth doing wrong the first time.*" Think about that. It makes sense. Why would any of us imagine we're going to get everything right all the time. Only Mothers in law can do that ...

Instead of thinking we can never make mistakes, it might be better to focus on not making the same mistakes over and over. That's something I have trouble with, but I'm working on it. Or you might focus on not making the mistake of being so worried about messing things up you never do anything at all. As we'll see in the lessons and the prayers and songs today, it's clear that not to try at all means you will automatically fail. To put it another way, if you are so worried about failing you never try anything, you will surely fail. That can't be what God intends for your life. Right? God wants more from you, even if more means more mistakes. I want to correct an impression I have gotten before that Christians should be perfect (or if not perfect, they should at least look perfect), so they focus on not sinning. But when you do that, all your efforts go into what you are not doing, and you have no time left to, well, to do anything useful. The only one on the team who can get away with playing it safe is the guy at the end of the bench who doesn't play at all. That's not me. I believe God asks you and me to get up and get going. You are to go forward, trusting not that you'll get it all right, but that you'll get God's help all along the way. Don't worry. When you see God's will more clearly, you find the strength you need to face the day, and in God's presence all your fears are washed away. So let's get up my friends, and get going ...

Judges 6:11-16 (The Message)

One day the angel of God came ... to Gideon who was threshing wheat in the winepress, out of sight of his enemies. The angel of God appeared to him and said, "God is with you, O mighty warrior!" Gideon replied, "With me, my master? If God is with us, why has all this happened to us? Where are all the miracles our parents and grandparents told us about, telling us, 'Didn't God deliver us from Egypt?' The fact is, God has nothing to do with us—he has turned us over to our enemies."

But God faced him directly: "Go in this strength that is yours. Save Israel from its enemies. Haven't I just sent you?" Gideon said to him, "Me, my master? How and with what could I ever save Israel? Look at me. My clan's the weakest in Manasseh and I'm the runt of the litter." God said to him, "I'll be with you. Believe me ..."

Reflection: You know if I could do accents this reading would be a lot more fun. It's an original Laurel and Hardy kind of sketch. We dress it up in Bible language and lose the humor. God sends an angel to Gideon to tell him he will deliver the people from their enemies. This should come as good news to a guy who is hard at work, making wine, and we're told he's doing it in a particular place so the enemy army doesn't see him. Almost always when an angel shows up in scripture the first thing the angel does is say, "Fear not." Here Gideon is not afraid. He's not even impressed. The angel brings him good news, and calls him mighty warrior. Gideon starts to kvetch. With me? You joking? Does this look like God is with me? Give me a freakin break." Then Gideon goes on to whine at length, reminding the angel that in previous days there were miracles, but not now, and God is not helping things at all. At this point God upgrades from an angel and shows up himself. Pretty impressive. Except to Gideon. God tells him to get up and go deliver the people, and for good measure adds, "Haven't I sent you?" Gideon answers, "Yeah, nice. I'm a little guy and I don't have an army. I think I'll pass." It's tough when God ends up standing there saying, "No really. Believe me ..." And the story doesn't stop here. God offers to give Gideon a sign. Gideon gets the miracle the next morning but is not satisfied so he asks for a do-over. God gives him another miracle the next morning, but then Gideon comes up with a request for another ... and you get the idea that here's someone who is not with the program. He's feeling small, he's feeling beaten. He's bought into an understanding that he is a loser, and he belongs to a nation of losers, and even his God is a loser. And so he's not getting up and going anywhere. What's the point? It's easier to sit back and complain.

Only that's not where God wants to leave Gideon. And it's not where God wants to lead you and me. The opportunities God has given you mean you may make a mistake. Or you may do something great. And the difference between the two is whether or not you are afraid to fail, or whether you are ready and up to the challenge God offers you this week. Will you sit back, or step forward?

Video clip: Take a shot

Will Rogers once wrote that "even if you're on the right track you'll get run over if you don't move." Maybe that's why the Bible so often talks about God as the one who leads us. He doesn't ask us to stay put, but to get up and follow him. If you don't, you're going to get left behind, when instead God is ready to lead you through your mistakes, through your failures, through even the valley of the shadow of death, all the way back to him. It's been said that every saint has a past ... for we have all made mistakes ... but it's also been said that every sinner has a future ... if we follow God's lead. Because God does not see you or me as sinners, or as losers, but as children. And he will never let go of you if you trust him to lead you through life's challenges ...

You never let go

*Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death
Your perfect love is casting out fear
And even when I'm caught in the middle
of the storms of this life
I won't turn back, I know you are near
And I will fear no evil, for my God is with me
And if my God is with me whom then shall I fear?
Oh no, you never let go,
through the calm and through the storm
Oh no, you never let go, in every high and every low
Oh no, you never let go, Lord, you never let go of me
And I can see a light that is coming
for the heart that holds on
A glorious light beyond all compare
And there will be an end to these troubles
but until that day comes
We'll live to know you here on the earth
And I will fear no evil, for my God is with me
And if my God is with me, whom then shall I fear?
Oh no, you never let go,
through the calm and through the storm
Oh no, you never let go, in every high and every low
Oh no, you never let go, Lord, you never let go of me*

Intro to message: This past week we've seen some amazing things around here. The Inauguration went fairly smoothly, no terrorist attacks, no bloody demonstrations, and only a few snafus in crowd control. Yes, I know the Chief Justice of the Supreme Court flubbed his line, and so the swearing in was not perfect. But I liked that too. It showed we are all human, even presidents and judges. Perfection, you know, is a hard thing to live up to. For instance, the new president has been hailed as a symbol of transformational change, as a messiah for a new age in American politics. The expectations for our president are so high, there is no way anyone could ever live up to it. And no matter if you share the same views on abortion and Guantanamo as he does, no matter whether you voted for McCain or you had a dozen Obama signs in your front yard, no matter what, the president will not live up to everyone's expectations. He can't. No one could. And so sometime, sooner or later, he will disappoint.

We didn't have perfection at the Inauguration. I've heard many folk say Metro did a great job though, as did the district police,

and so many others in handling what could have been a terrible mess. We had people from church there standing in lines, waiting for hours. There was, however one bit of perfection to the whole event, and it went unseen and forgotten. For me the unsung heroes for the Inauguration were the two guys who were there, at every moment, not touched by the crowds, not worried about speeches, but walking in the closest example of perfection we have, guarding the tomb of the unknown soldiers. No matter what else happens in the world, those two guys are always there. No matter the temps, the weather, the state of emergency, the historical events happening. They are there right now, God bless 'em, reminding us what duty looks like. And giving a little glimpse of perfection. Because, I am told, even they at rare moments, mess up.

Let's face it, perfection is simply a hard thing to accomplish. That makes it seem so very odd for Jesus to say he expects you and me to be perfect. Yes that's right. Jesus wants you to be perfect. Said so himself. Here in the middle of his most famous teaching, known as the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says: **"Be perfect, therefore, as your heavenly Father is perfect."** [Matthew 5:48 NRSV] So, what do you think about that? Been even close to perfect lately?

Not likely is it ... Jesus spoke about this again, giving advice to another would-be follower about how he could be perfect. Jesus

said, *"If you want to be perfect, go and sell all you have and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven. Then come, follow me ..."*

[Matthew 19:21 NLT] That's not very likely either is it? OK, so it's starting to become clear that either Jesus was crazy and not worth following or we

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are not yet following what he meant. You would not be alone in that. His own disciples asked him what he meant. They didn't get it either. The story continues, *"The disciples were astounded. 'Then who in the world can be saved?' Jesus looked at them intently and said, 'Humanly speaking, it is impossible. But with God everything is possible.'"* [Matthew 19:25-26 NLT] At least here Jesus recognizes that perfection is only possible with God's help. It's not possible for you and me on our own.

That's a relief. The Bible clearly states that no one is perfect but God alone, so that rather takes away any of the suspense that you might be seen by others making a mistake. *"All have fallen short of the glory of God"* the Bible reminds us. Or in a newer version we hear it said, *"we've each proved that we are utterly incapable of living the glorious lives God wills for us."* [Romans 3:23 The Message] I'm not suggesting this is a good excuse for bad behavior, just a good reason to give up worrying about being perfect.

For example, it's said that the number one thing are afraid of is

... speaking in public. I'll bet there are many of you here who would not be comfortable if I asked you to come up here and share a few thoughts about life. Worse yet I might ask you to read from the Bible one of those passages that uses big words like Nebuchadnezer and Jehosephat. Even if you had prepared notes, your heart might go faster, you might worry about other people looking at you, whatever. For some reason people get afraid of being in front of folk because they might make a mistake. There are, however, well known tricks to getting over that fear. (1) Start by telling people you are a little nervous. When you try to hide being nervous, you'll only get more nervous. And it's not like everyone else in the room can't hear how nervous you are anyway. So go ahead and get that out in the open. (2) If you are worried about making a mistake it can overwhelm you. Simply plan on making one small mistake on purpose in the first few sentences of your presentation. Then, having made a mistake, you no longer have to worry about being perfect. You can simply get on with speaking. (3) Maybe you've heard this trick before, that you should picture everyone in the room in their underwear. Can I go on record as saying that's not something I do here at Church. Personally I'd find it distracting. But the point here is you need to change your focus from "How well am I speaking" and "Am I making any mistakes" to "How can I help someone else understand what I'm talking about". As long as you are focussed on you, then you are what's important. When you focus on other people, they become more important, and then any mistakes you make become a lot less important, because after all, it's really about the other person. (4) Finally, just remember there are many of us who speak in public professionally who make mistakes all the time. Like me. Or the Chief Justice, or a President.

I've shared these tactics for public speaking with you because they explain a lot more than how to give your next presentation. The same things can help you understand how to live with God, and without a fear of failure.

(1) Recognize you are not perfect. You can't live up to the standard of perfection, at least not without God's intervention. You can try, and I applaud your efforts. I'm not going to give up trying to do my best. I certainly don't want my daughter to stop trying for A's. But I'll love her even if she gets bad grades. I'll love her, but I'll help her do better, and want to see her make some effort, that's for sure. But not getting all A's is not a sign of failure. Being imperfect is not a matter for shame, it's a reminder that you are human. Your own mistakes are an opportunity for you to remember how much you need God's help. You can't do life on your own. Forgetting that little truth is the sin of spiritual pride. However, remembering your own failings is the first step to being able to forgive other people there's, and even, to experience God's forgiveness of your own. And don't worry that you don't have what it takes, because God takes you as you are. Jesus once said, "Go and learn the meaning of this Scripture: *'I want you to be merciful; I don't want your sacrifices.'* For I have come to call sinners, not those who think they are already good enough." [Matthew 9:13 NLT] That's me. I'm not good enough, but I am ready and willing. How about you? If so, then ...

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(2) Sin boldly that grace may abound. This was a line made famous years ago by Martin Luther (not The Rev. Martin Luther King). I find that the first two words of his famous quote are all that people remember these days. Sin Boldly. Sounds like the motto for my college fraternity. But Luther added the second

bit there about "grace abound-ing." What he meant was that you should live boldly. Don't worry about mistakes. You're going to make a bunch of them. And when you do, you can rely on God for his grace, for forgiveness. Only don't let the fear of sinning stop you from living boldly. If you see someone in need and do not help, you are not being bold enough. If you

are worried about sharing your faith with someone else, you are not being bold at all. It's time to get up and get moving. Christ is not asking for Christ sitters, but Christ Followers. I like the old African proverb which says: *"Every morning a gazelle wakes up. It knows it must run faster than the fastest lion or it will be killed. Every morning the lion wakes up. It knows it must run faster than the slowest gazelle or it will starve to death. So it doesn't matter whether you are a gazelle or a lion. When the sun comes up you better be running."*

(3) Look at other people, not your own performance. Failure gets measured in whole different terms when you stop looking at your own performance and instead look at the difference you can make in another's life. Who says that real success is not making any mistakes, or not trying new things, or not going boldly where no one has gone before, so long as you are going with God that is. Being bold in itself is not the deal, but being bold enough to follow God's lead is. You're going to make mistakes along the way, maybe even fail sometimes. The real question is not about making mistakes, but about making a difference. Are you? Or are you letting a fear of failure hold you back from doing great things for God.

(4) God loves sinners. Good thing, because really, who else is there to love around here? Only how do you see yourself? If you see yourself as a loser, you will become paralyzed, unable to live into your potential, unwilling to follow where God leads. Once you've failed at something you may never try again. That was Gideon's problem. He thought too little of himself, and he also thought too little about God's power to change failure into victory. Imagine yourself as a winner, and you may take too much credit for your own success and fall into the sin of spiritual pride that says you don't need God. However, in between seeing yourself as a Loser or as a Winner is something else, how God sees you. For when God sees you he sees someone who is his beloved child. He sees you as someone who may get all A's or may not, and it doesn't matter so long as you are trying, so long as you are following him, it doesn't matter if you stub your foot or stumble at times.

You have a past? Join the club. So do I. You have made mistakes, you have at times turned away from God? Yes, all of us have fallen short of God's glory. But don't let that hold you back now from knowing all God has waiting for you. As we

have said here at the Spirit for years, "God is not worried about your past. He's only really concerned with where you go from here." God does not want to condemn, only to lead you back to where you belong. And so the failings of the past can not hold you back. And if you are afraid of failing in the future, let me tell you, the best way not to fail is to follow God's lead in the first place. And since we have not always done that, let us now make a fresh start, and join in asking God to forgive us all that is past ...

*Most merciful God,
We confess that we have sinned against you
in thought, word, and deed,
by what we have done, and by what we have left undone.
We have not loved you with our whole heart;
We have not loved our neighbors as ourselves.
We are truly sorry and we humbly repent.
For the sake of your Son Jesus Christ,
have mercy on us and forgive us;
that we may delight in your will, and walk in your ways,
to the glory of your Name. Amen.*

*Almighty God, our heavenly Father, who of his great mercy hath
promised forgiveness of sins to all those who with hearty
repentance and true faith turn unto him, have mercy upon you,
pardon and deliver you from all your sins, confirm and strengthen
you in all goodness, and bring you to everlasting life; through
Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.*

*Hear the Word of God to all who truly turn to him.
Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and I will
refresh you. Matthew 11:28
God so loved the world, that he gave his only-begotten Son, to
the end that all that believe in him should not perish, but have
everlasting life. John 3:16
This is a true saying, and worthy of all men to be received, that
Christ Jesus came into the world to save sinners.
1 Timothy 1:15*

*If any man sin, we have an Advocate with the Father, Jesus
Christ the righteous; and he is the perfect offering for our sins,
and not for ours only, but for the sins of the whole world.
1 John 2:1-2*
