

1 It's a strange but true fact that I tend to remember more of my failures in life than I do my successes. Why is that? Perhaps because failing can be scary, failing can be costly, and failing seldom feels good. I failed my first attempt at getting a driver's license because the instructor said I didn't look over my shoulder enough. Why can't I forget that and remember something more important, like where I put my keys?

I failed in my attempt to rebuild a carburetor in my first car, a Chevy Nova. Gas sprayed everywhere when I started the engine because I didn't really understand how the float valve worked. I failed to keep my canoe upright once as a young adult while crossing a large, windy, and very cold lake and wound up in the water with hypothermia. I failed at my first try at college, dropping out in the middle of the second quarter. I've endured several notable plumbing failures. Once I tried to remove a valve in a shower and ended up torquing the brass tubing right out of the wall. Another time I tried to secure some loose drywall in a bathroom and ended up adding about a dozen drywall screws to the waste pipe behind the wall. Basically, I created a pachinko game with the waste pipe.

I've failed countless times as a parent and a husband, sometimes losing my temper, sometimes forgetting to do something that was important to Jana or the kids. I've even failed as a Pastor, in countless ways. One of my most spectacular pastoral failures, a church plant in a shopping center, cost me three years of struggle and cost the Conference about \$250,000! Say what you will about failure being necessary to learning, most of us just don't like to fail, and sometimes failure just seems to cost too much.

How about you? Do you have a well-indexed catalogue of the failures in your life? When you fail, is your first response, "Oh, great! An opportunity to learn and grow!" or are you more like the rest of us mortals, who are far more likely to say, "That's the last time I'll do that again!"? God doesn't want us to live in fear, of failure or anything else. Let's take another step forward today as we continue to learn to live unafraid, full of courage and hope.

2 One of the most helpful things about our Bible is that it's so very honest and transparent about the struggles that God's people have had in being the kind of people God wants us to be. Moses wasn't the first one to fail, doubting himself and doubting God. Last week we talked about Adam and Eve, who bear the distinction of being not only the first two

human beings, but also the first two human beings to make a mistake! Think about that—you'll never have to worry about failing that badly! And it all went downhill from there. Cain murder Able. Noah was obedient in making the Ark, but then later got drunk and did something decidedly ungodly with one of his daughters. While travelling through Egypt, Abraham repeatedly lied about the identity of his wife, a decision that was made to protect his own skin at the cost of endangering his wife's chastity. So when Moses came into the picture, he already stood in the good company of many others of God's children who had failed.

The full account of the conversation Moses had with God at the burning bush is a long attempt by Moses to get out of the assignment God was giving him. It's punctuated with phrases from Moses like this: "Who am I? Who are you? What if they don't listen to me?" And when those didn't work, Moses tried this: "You know, God, I'm really terrible at making speeches." And when even that failed, Moses tried the cry of last resort: "Lord, please! Send anyone else."¹ In my younger years, I was pretty hard on Moses when I read that. Seen from the vantage point of someone approaching sixty, however, I have to say I really feel for the guy. There have been plenty of times when I myself have said the same thing: Lord, please! Send anyone else!

Even in his death, Moses failed to complete the job God originally gave him, to lead God's people into the promised land. Even that should be comforting to us, because not even the failures of Moses could thwart God's plan to bring blessings to all people. Which is exactly where we pick up the story now, as Joshua, the right-hand man of Moses, takes over the leadership mission and gets his marching orders. I'm reading the first nine verses in Joshua 9 in the New Living Translation.

{Read Joshua 1:1-9, NLT}

3 I recently referred to the Old Testament's mixed message on the treatment of strangers, and this text certainly comes out of that part of the Bible's history. I invite you to look beyond the violent conquest of Canaan and consider first the premise of this verse in terms of our relationship with God: "Be strong and courageous. Do not be frightened. Do not

¹ Exodus 4:13, New Living Translation (2nd Edition)

be dismayed. For the Lord your God is with you.” Do you feel strong and courageous? If not, I wonder if part of the reason is that you’re not fully appreciating the last part of God’s pronouncement, “For the Lord your God is with you.”

I like this picture because most of us don’t see ourselves as having superpowers, even with the Holy Spirit on our side. At best, we might see ourselves as little baby super people, dressing the part but never really flying. Why is that? I think it’s because we’re afraid to fly, fearing that if we do fly and fail, it will just be too hard a landing. We’re afraid to fly because in this age of Instagram and twitter, our failures to fly can be broadcast to a record number of people in no time at all. We’re afraid to fly because the image we have of ourselves might turn out to be a little different than the reality. We might not be quite as skilled, quite as heroic as we’ve imagined or even portrayed ourselves to be.

Do you know what I’m afraid to fail at? I’m afraid that I’ll continue to pour my life into seeking the renewal of the church, only to find that either that I’m the wrong leader for the job, or that no amount of leadership can re-ignite our zeal for our mission of reaching out and bringing Jesus to new people. That’s a pretty worthless thing to be afraid of, isn’t it? Because if I do give everything God has asked of me, then I really haven’t failed, regardless of my shortcomings and regardless of the results. Courageous faith is all that’s asked of us. God will take care of moving the mountains.

It seems to me that the key to unlocking our fear of failure has to be in drawing closer to the one who made us and called us to the tasks that lie ahead. If you’re trying to accomplish something God isn’t behind, then perhaps you ought to be afraid of succeeding! The Holy Spirit isn’t an all-purpose tool like a magical cape, allowing us to fly off to wherever we want to. When we’re flying against the wind, and God has pointed us in that direction, then by all means be strong and courageous, certain that God goes with you. But you’d best ground all future flights if you haven’t first checked in with the one who gave you the cape in the first place.

4 One of the scariest things I’ve ever done is to pack up my family and move them to rural Kentucky, where I attended seminary. I love the label on the truck in this picture: One Way. It really felt like that, pulling up stakes, leaving our careers, and jumping off into the unknown. The only thing that allowed us to do that with courage was a long process of

discernment, with God, with God's Word, with each other, and with so many other Christians we knew and trusted. But ultimately, each step of that journey came down to stepping off in faith, with no guarantees of the results. God never even promised me a seminary degree, but God did promise that when we stepped out in faith, God would be with us and would even go before us to prepare the way. If you know you can do it on your own, it probably doesn't require much faith.

When was the last time you tried to do something you weren't sure you could do? Did God lead you to try it? Did you learn something about God or your faith, whether you succeeded or failed? Each step we take on our journey of following Jesus is an opportunity to follow where Jesus leads us, to get lost on side tracks of our own devising, or even to quit, turn around, and go home. I know what God would say- the same thing God has always said: "Go, for I will be with you."

5 Every day we're confronted with choices: Big, life-changing decisions like taking a new job, moving, or retiring, or smaller things, like are you going to set aside some time this week to serve a neighbor in need. None of us have the luxury of laying back and watching life pass us by, because even the decision to do nothing is a decision. Are we going to make our choices, big or small, courageously, following what we can best discern to be God's will as we in the Scriptures, as we discern in prayer, and as we learn from other people of faith? Or are we going to let our fear make our choices for us. Are we going to put our faith in the one who loves us and calls us his own? Or are we going to put our faith in ourselves, limiting what we try to do in this life based on what we think we can manage on our own?

Not every risky decision is holy or God-inspired. But I'm willing to bet that all of us have passed by moments of opportunity to take chances for God, often because we're simply afraid to fail. This week, I invite you to try something new. Each morning, take a moment- even if it's less than five minutes- to sit quietly and listen for God's voice. You might want to start with a phrase from 1 Samuel 3:9, "Speak Lord, for your servant is listening." Ask God to show you where God is already at work, and where you can step out in courage and join in God's work. It's a prayer God loves to answer. And when you see that God's hand is leading you and providing for you, your faith will be strengthened for the steps that lie ahead, especially the steps that you just can't see coming.



Buffalo United Methodist Church



...serving people for Jesus Christ so that we all may know joy!

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