Sunday, July 13, 1980
LEARNING HOW TO HANDLE FAILURE
Mark 6:1-13

Is there anyone here this morning who has not had to deal with failure? Learning how to handle failure is a problem which all of us face. One of the reasons we have so much difficulty with failure is because our culture is so success oriented. Many of us therefore simply deny failure as an option. We don't want to admit that we or anyone else ever fails.

I have read many books, for example, on how to handle your teen-agers successfully. What one is rarely told however is that sometimes we will fail. Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross likes to tell of her early attempts to interview dying patients in a Chicago Hospital, only to discover a great reluctance at each nursing station to admit that there were dying or critically ill patients there. The hospital staff would not freely admit this apparent failure. In one hospital she met a head nurse who was proud of her record of twenty years with no deaths while she was in charge. They all died on the next shift.

Most of us do have trouble admitting failure. For the Christian, the denial of failure has even become part of a false theological structure which views failure as. the result of being out of tune with God's will. There are all kinds of popular "Christian" books which imply that if one is truly a Christian, he or she will always succeed in every endeavor — that's false Christian theology.

Our lives are filled with little failures and big ones. We get passed over for a promotion. We lose some money in an investment. We lock our keys in the car. Our marriage begins to come apart. Our children do not turn out the way we had hoped. We are not making as much money as we would like. While many people would not publicly admit it, privately they believe that they lose more than they win. The only ones who never fail of course are those who never compete or take any chances at all. On the other hand, anyone can win, unless there happens to be a second entry.

What most of us forget is that losing like winning is a human condition. But since losing and failure are so unpopular, we tend to ignore them and pretend it can't happen, unless of course it happens to someone else.

The idea of winning at any cost places a heavy strain on morality. When winning become too important, the temptation to cheat increases. In high-level contract bridge tournaments, the players are separated by a screen so that they cannot give hand signals and a barrier is placed along the bottom of the table so they cannot give signals by kicking each other. In a recent bridge tournament, players were found giving illicit information by means of a series of sniffs and coughs.

Sometimes, the urge for winning is so strong that the competition among players becomes secondary to that between players and officials. Players who attempt to break or circumvent the rules of the game give a new interpretation to winning. They "win" if their deceptions go undetected and "lose" if they get caught. The philosophy of winning at any cost has caused some colleges and universities trouble in their athletic departments.

In addition to the threat to moral standards, the over-emphasis on winning can take much of the fun out of competing.

Overall, what we tend to forget with the exaggerated emphasis on winning at any cost is that losing like winning is a part of life. No one wins all the time. We all have our failures.

Jesus Christ knew this. He wasn't a one-hundred percent success. The Gospel stories tell us that he failed in his own hometown. "He could do no mighty works there." Jesus also prepared his disciples for the fact that they wouldn't always succeed. When he sent them out two by two, he said, "If any place will not receive you and they refuse to hear you, when you leave, shake off the dust that is on your feet for a testimony against them." Jesus himself certainly knew rejection, not only by the people of his hometown.

Thus, when Jesus told his disciples to "shake off the dust that is on your feet," this was not to be taken as a ready and easy excuse for quitting a job just when it got difficult or before all the possibilities had been explored. This was not the kind of "dust-shaking" Jesus meant. It was a symbolic disclaiming of responsibility if the people persistently refused to hear.

These words of Jesus give us direction for going on in spite of our failures. He was saying, "When you meet disappointment, don't let yourself get completely stopped. Just close that chapter and start the next. There are other towns, other efforts to be made.

History is full of examples of failure from which people have gone on to great achievement. Jesus met failure in Nazareth, so he closed that chapter and went on. It has been said of Napoleon that he had a technique for victory but no technique for defeat. As Christians we have a technique for defeat, and that's what we want to look at in more detail now. Here's what we can learn from the example of Christ and from our Christian faith as to how to handle failure.

1. First, remember that all of us are going to fail sometimes; admit it when it happens. No one bats a thousand. That's what Jesus was telling his disciples as he sent them out. Not everyone you meet is going to be receptive to your message.

Even though a small loss or failure may be painful, sometimes it is. necessary to accept it gracefully in order to reverse a losing trend. The inability to admit a small mistake can frequently lead to making large mistakes or even cause us to overlook the opportunity of bailing out and devoting our energies to some other activity that. would be rewarding.

Perhaps the biggest deterrent to admitting failure is a false sense of pride. I'm told that many people lose heavily in the stock market and other investments because they cannot admit their mistakes.

Those who can admit their mistakes, however, sometimes win by losing. Richard Carlyle was a bright, aggressive salesman. By the age of 30, he had skyrocketed to the position of National sales manager of a large company. Shortly afterward, a bad turn in the market caused his company some sudden reverses. As the pressure mounted to produce, Richard found that his inexperience prevented him from doing the job that was demanded of him. Realizing that he was in over his head, he went to management and suggested that he be permitted to find someone to come into the organization over him and offered to either work with the person or resign. Knowing that Richard had potential, and appreciating his candor in recognizing his limitations, top management went along with his suggestion. They were able to hire a top sales manager who had taken early re-tirement from another company, on a two-year contract.

Before the two years were up, with coaching from the older man, Richard had acquired the necessary know-how to move again into the top spot and to run the department successfully.

Rather than deny his failure to do the job he was hired to do, or let it demoralize him, Richard correctly interpreted the failure as an indication of his inexperience, and he was then able to do something constructive to change the situation from a negative one to a positive one.

2. Secondly, in addition to being able to recognize and admit our mistakes and failures, remember too that sometimes we misinterpret failure. What looks like failure to us may not be failure at all. Like beauty, success or failure is often times in the eye of the beholder. What is victory to some may be defeat to others and vice versa.

A high school athlete who runs a mile in four and one-half minutes might well consider it an outstanding accomplishment, but a world-class distance runner would view the same time as a poor showing. Judged by his teachers in school, Albert Einstein was a failure. Judged by the world for his later accomplishments, he was acclaimed a genius.

In business circles, an executive who commands a large salary will most likely be perceived as a success. During a divorce proceeding, however, the spouse may claim the person is a failure as a provider, a lover, and responsible family member.

Sometimes too our own definitions of success or failure may be inadequate or too narrow. Furthermore, in judging our own performance, it is not uncommon to use a more demanding criterion than we use to measure the accomplishments of others. Leonardo da Vinci, whose genius spanned almost all the arts and sciences thought he was a failure. He said of himself, “I have offended God and mankind because my work didn’t reach the quality it should have.”

Not only do we misjudge success and failure in regard to ourselves, but we also are not always good judges of others. Mozart was considered by many a failure in his own lifetime. He died in Vienna and was buried in a pauper’s grave, and no one today even knows the location of his grave site. But who today would consider Mozart a failure?

By our usual standards of judging, Jesus Christ was a failure. He died the death of a common criminal on a cross, was buried in a borrowed grave. He never wrote a book, never made much money. He never did any of the things that we usually think of when we consider someone as being successful.

3. Thirdly, in handling our own failure, remember that we can learn more from failure than from success.

Years ago, when an aspiring young writer interviewed IBM president, Thomas J. Watson, he was given some unusual, but good advice by the industrialist. “It’s not exactly my line,” said Watson, “but would you like me to give you a formula for writing success? It’s quite simple, really. Double your rate of failure. You’re making a common mistake,” he continued, “you’re thinking of failure as the enemy of success, but it isn’t at all. Failure is a teacher — a harsh teacher perhaps, but the best. You say you have a desk full of manuscripts? That’s great! Every one of them was rejected for a reason. Have you pulled them to pieces looking for that reason? You can be discouraged by failure, or you can learn from it. So go ahead and make mistakes. Make all you can. Because remember that’s where you’ll find success, on the far side of failure.”

We can profit from failure when we have the courage and willingness to face our failures and the reasons for them. Most of us, however, have been conditioned to feel stupid when we make mistakes, to expect humiliation when our failures and errors come to light. These attitudes are hard to break.

Arthur Gordon, the man.to whom Thomas Watson gave his success formula, went on to become a well-known author and editor. Following his conversation with Watson, Gordon had a new perspective on failure. “Somewhere inside me a basic attitude had shifted. A project turned down, a lot of rejected manuscripts — why these were nothing to be ashamed of. They were rungs in a ladder — that was all. If you can learn from failure, you’ll go pretty much where you want to go.“

Above all, remember God judges· our successes and failures quite different from our human judgments. What we consider a failure, God may judge a success, and what we judge a success, in God‘s eyes may be a failure.

In the parable of the last judgment which Jesus told as recorded in the gospel of Matthew, we are reminded that God does not judge success or failure according to what position we had in life, or whether we made or save lots of money, or owned all kinds of property, or whether we were successful in politics. Those who are considered successful according to God’s standards are those who fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stranger, clothed the naked and visited and cared for those who were sick and in prison.

God judges our success or failure according to how we treat other people and how we take care of God’s creation. In God’s eyes we all have the possibility for true success. It’s up to us. Amen.