Sunday, May 16, 1993
THE WALLENDA FACTOR
Matthew 14:22-33; Luke 17:5-6

The title of this sermon, “The Wallenda Factor,” comes from an essay by Dr. Warren Bennis, a Distinguished Professor of Business Administration at the University of Southern California. The essay has been republished in a new book by Dr. Bennis called An Invented Life. My wife and I had dinner with Dr. Bennis and his wife on Saturday evening here in Lincoln. He is in this area because today he will receive an honorary degree from Doane College in Crete.

Dr. Bennis claims that what he calls the “Wallenda Factor” is as much about life as it is about management. Some years ago, he conducted an in-depth study of 90 leaders from a variety of organizations and backgrounds. His purpose was to discover the characteristic that allows a few people to do extraordinary things.

He found that those who successfully walked the high-wire in whatever field they chose had much in common. They took risks without dwelling too much on the downside. They saw error not in terms of failure but in terms of growth.

In Dr. Bennis’ own words, “One of the most impressive and memorable qualities of the leaders I studied was the way they responded to failure. Like Karl Wallenda, the great tightrope aerialist, who once said, ‘The only time I feel truly alive is when I walk the tightrope,’ these leaders put all their energies into their task. They simply don’t think about failure, don’t even use the word, relying on such synonyms as mistake, glitch, bungle, or countless others, such as false start, mess, hash, bollix, or error. Never failure. One of them said during the course of an interview that ‘a mistake is just another way of doing things.’ Another said, ‘I try to make as many mistakes as quickly as I can in order to learn.'”

Some of you may remember that Karl Wallenda fell to his death in 1978 while walking a 75-foot-high tightrope in downtown San Juan, Puerto Rico. Wallenda’s wife said it was her husband’s most dangerous walk. She also said, “All Karl thought about for three months prior to it was falling. It was the first time he’d ever thought about that, and it seemed to me that he put all his energy into ‘not falling,’ instead of walking the tightrope.”

Mrs. Wallenda went on to say that her husband even went so far as to personally supervise the installation of the tightrope, making certain that the guy-wires were secure — something he had never even thought of before.

Dr. Bennis claims that from what he learned from his interviews with successful leaders, he could say that when Karl Wallenda poured his energies into ‘not falling’ rather than on the positive action and goal of walking the tightrope, he was virtually destined to fail. The Wallenda Factor, which had been present and working in all of his previous tightrope walks, was, for this one time, absent.

On the other hand, in all of the hundreds of previous walks on the tightrope, which combined a vision, persistence, consistency, and the self-confidence necessary for successful tightrope walking, that’s the same positive combination that Dr. Bennis found in so many leaders and is what he now calls “the Wallenda Factor.”

When I read about the Wallenda Factor, I immediately thought of the story from the Gospel of Matthew where Jesus appears walking on the water toward the disciples, who were in distress in their boat because of a sudden storm that had come up. They were at first afraid, but when Jesus spoke to them and they recognized his voice, their fear vanished.

Peter was so inspired that he was sure he too could walk on the water, and at the invitation of Jesus, he began to do so. He was doing fine until he began to worry about sinking. He made the mistake of looking down and realized what he was doing. Instead of continuing to walk toward his goal, he began to concentrate on not sinking, and as soon as this happened, of course, he began to sink. It's the exact opposite of the Wallenda Factor. When we begin to focus on the fact that we might fail, it frequently becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

Isn't this what happens to many of us? There are times in the storms of life when our faith is strong, and we can walk on water or balance ourselves on a tightrope. We can be on top of the crisis and not panic. We can even find ourselves doing all sorts of things with incredible strength that we never knew we had before. But then, if we stop in the middle of what we are doing and begin to worry — if we begin to concentrate on not failing instead of continuing to work toward our goal — then we may very well begin to fail. Such is the power of negative thoughts. It's the opposite of the Wallenda Factor.

According to the Bible, the negative thoughts of people around us can even affect us. There's another story in the Gospel of Matthew where the power of the negative thoughts of the crowd around Jesus seems to have prevented him from doing his work, and in addition, their negative and jealous thoughts kept the people themselves from seeing Jesus as he truly was.

He had come back to his hometown of Nazareth but didn't get a good reception. The gospel story says, "They took offense at him." They were jealous and doubting. Matthew then adds, "And he did not do many deeds of power there because of their unbelief."

The people of Nazareth had seen Jesus grow up. Since they were familiar with his past, they thought they knew all about him in the present. Familiarity had dulled their sensitivity and closed their minds. That too, can happen to us.

George Bernard Shaw used to say, "The only man who behaves sensibly is my tailor; he takes my measurements anew every time he sees me, while all the rest go on with their old measurements and expect me to fit them."

On the other side of the coin is the Wallenda Factor — the amazing power of a positive and active faith and what it can do for us and for others around us.

Do you remember Ray Meyer, perhaps the winningest coach in college basketball, who led DePaul University to 40 straight years of winning seasons? When his team lost its first home game after 29 straight home-court victories, he was asked how he felt about it. His response was, "Great! Now we can start concentrating on winning, not on not losing."

In similar fashion, the hypochondriac is a person who focuses on not getting sick rather than on staying well and enjoying life. He is always afraid — afraid that he might come into contact with some kind of bacteria or virus. Any little pain or other symptom causes him to withdraw in fear. He spends all of his time avoiding illness rather than enjoying good health. Remember the epitaph the hypochondriac had on his tombstone: "I told you I was sick."

On the other hand, we now know how much a positive attitude can contribute to good health, both mental and physical. We know that the body will exert all kinds of healing power on its own behalf if a person genuinely believes he or she is going to get well and concentrates on the positive aspects and the joy of healthy living rather than on the negative side of not getting sick. It's another form of the Wallenda Factor.

To put it another way, Jesus invites us to have a positive and active faith instead of a passive belief. What is the difference?

Here's an illustration from a circus act that a minister friend of mine uses to make the distinction between passive belief and active faith.

A skilled high-wire artist has accomplished so many marvelous feats that the audience has come to believe that he can do almost anything. Now the ringmaster in the circus addresses the crowd: "Ladies and gentlemen, how many of you believe that this daring man can ride safely over the high wire on his bicycle while carrying someone on his shoulders? If you believe he can do it, please raise your hand!" If we were in the audience, we might raise our hands along with all the others, a great silent chorus of belief.

"Very well, then," says the ringmaster, seeing the almost unanimous vote of confidence, "now who would like to be the first to volunteer to sit on his shoulders?"

The difference between passive belief and active faith is the difference between staying in our seats while taking no risks and volunteering to climb on the shoulders of the high-wire artist. Jesus invites us to have a vibrant and active faith, to possess the Wallenda Factor. One day, he told his disciples, when they asked him to increase their faith, "If you had faith the size of a mustard seed, you could say to this mulberry tree, 'Be rooted up, and be planted in the sea,' and it would obey you."

How then do we begin to grow this kind of active faith so that we possess the Wallenda Factor? By daily practicing two things — appreciation and gratitude.

I read somewhere that no amount of material possession produces true wealth. Enjoying and appreciating what we have, no matter how little or much it might be, is what makes us wealthy. There is no such thing as the pursuit of happiness, but there is the discovery of joy.

It's another part of the Wallenda Factor, which comes straight from the life and teachings of Jesus. May we never let the things we can't have, don't have, or shouldn't have, spoil our enjoyment of the things we do have and can have.

The problem is, we take so many of the good things in life for granted. Take our bodies, for example. If we have a pain in our arm and the pain stops, our arm feels good. After a while, however, the arm feels pretty much like all the other parts of our body that are not in pain and is again ignored, taken for granted. When we're not in pain, we're seldom aware that our body is free from pain. That our body is free from pain is, of course, a good thing, but a good thing that we, most of the time, take for granted. This taking things for granted applies to all the functioning of the body — from the regular beating of our heart, our breathing, our digestion, our vision, and the process of thinking itself. When working okay, we're not aware that it's working okay, and therefore not aware of the goodness inherent in that.

It's also true for things outside ourselves. The new car is so wonderful when it's new. After a few weeks, however, it becomes "the car." It's the same car; we've just become accustomed to it. The same is true of most relationships. At first, it's "some enchanted evening," and eventually, it's "your week to take out the garbage." It's not that the car or the relationship (or anything else you care to name) is not still good, or that we wouldn't miss it if it were no longer in our life. A lot of the time, we simply aren't aware of the good that is around or within us for any length of time. If we're not aware of it, we don't appreciate it, and if we don't appreciate it, we're not likely to feel grateful for it.

There you have it — the Wallenda Factor. It means learning to appreciate, enjoy, and be grateful for the things we do have rather than always worrying about the things we do not have. It means that when you're walking the tightrope in life, as we often need to do, keep your eye on the goal, which is to walk on the tightrope to the other side, rather than focusing on not falling. That's what Jesus taught and lived. Amen.