Sunday, July 27, 1997
ANOTHER WAY OF DEFINING FAILURE
John 6:16-20; Matthew 14:28-33

Is there anyone listening to this sermon who has not had to deal with failure? Learning how to handle failure is something 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 fail.

Years ago, Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross told of her early attempts to interview dying patients in a Chicago hospital. She discovered a great reluctance among hospital staff to admit that there were dying or critically ill patients. 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 — though patients often died on the next shift.

Could it be that some of us have trouble dealing with failure because we have a faulty understanding or inaccurate definition of failure?

This is not to deny that failure exists. Our lives are filled with little failures and big ones. Some are of our own making, and some are not. You get passed over for a promotion. That might be your failure, or it could be someone else's failure to recognize your abilities. You lose money in an investment. You lock your keys in the car. Your marriage begins to come apart. Your children are not turning out the way you had hoped. You are not making as much money as you would like.

The only people who never fail, of course, are those who never try anything. We often forget that both failing and succeeding are part of the human condition.

Jesus knew failure. Not everyone he invited to be one of his followers accepted. When he returned to his hometown and preached in his home synagogue, they didn't accept him. They threw him out. He could do no mighty works there. He died as a relatively young man on a cross. Was the life of Jesus a failure? By many of our current measures of success, it was.

Jesus also prepared his disciples for the fact that they would not 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 as a testimony against them." In this metaphor, Jesus reminded them that when they meet disappointment and failure, they should leave it behind and not carry it with them. Move on.

Here's the first point our Christian faith makes about failure: All of us are going to fail sometimes. No one bats one-thousand. The important thing is to move on.

A few years ago, Michael Jordan decided to quit professional basketball to try to make it in professional baseball. At the time, his team, the Chicago Bulls, had won three NBA championships. When Jordan made his decision, sportswriters were skeptical. Jordan responded, "I am not afraid to fail." And fail he did, as far as professional baseball was concerned. Then he returned to the Bulls, and you know the rest of the story.

The second point in understanding and dealing with failure is that we need to have a new definition of failure. Let's look at the story of the disciples in the boat on the Sea of Galilee and what happened when they got caught in a fierce storm.

Some of the disciples were professional fishermen, and they had experienced storms before. But this storm was fierce. According to the Bible, "The boat was battered by the waves, was far from land, and the wind was against them." They were afraid of losing their lives.

In the midst of the storm, Jesus came to them, walking on the water with the comforting words, "Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid."

As a test, Peter answered, "Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water." And Jesus said, "Come." So Peter got out of the boat and started walking on the water toward Jesus. But when he started thinking about what he was doing, he became frightened and began to sink. Jesus had to reach out and help him get back into the boat.

Did Peter fail? In one sense, yes — his faith gave way, and he started to sink. But there were eleven bigger failures in the boat. They failed privately and quietly. Their failure was safe and unnoticed. Only Peter experienced the shame of public failure. But only Peter knew the momentary glory of walking on water. And only Peter knew, in a way the others never would, that when he sank, Jesus would be there.

In redefining failure and success, part of our problem is that we often let others define it for us. What our culture calls failure or success may not be the best or ultimate measure.

Is the movie with the largest box office returns the best or most successful movie? It's only the most successful in terms of money, but it could be a failure in other ways. Conversely, a movie or book with the most impact on people may not be the biggest seller. As Einstein said, "Not everything that counts can be counted, and not everything that can be counted counts."

A high school athlete who runs a mile in four-and-a-half minutes might consider it an outstanding accomplishment. But a world-class distance runner could see it as a poor performance. Albert Einstein was judged a failure by his teachers in early schooling, but the scientific community later acclaimed him a genius.

Sometimes our definitions of failure or success are too narrow.

Furthermore, we often hold ourselves to a more demanding standard than we use for 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 ourselves, but we also often misjudge others, particularly our contemporaries. Mozart was considered by many a failure in his lifetime. He died in Vienna and was buried in a pauper's grave, the location of which is unknown. Yet, who today would consider Mozart a failure?

When Harry Truman was President of the United States, many ranked him poorly among U.S. presidents. But as the years have passed, it's becoming increasingly clear that he was an excellent president and a fine U.S. senator before that.

The third point about redefining failure is this: we often learn more from failure than from success.

Years ago, an aspiring young writer interviewed IBM president Thomas J. Watson and received some unusual advice. “Would you like me to give you a formula for success?” Watson asked. “It’s quite simple really: Double your rate of failure.”

Watson continued, “You’re making a common mistake. You’re thinking of failure as the enemy of success, but it isn’t. Failure is a teacher — harsh, perhaps, but the best. Every one of your rejected manuscripts 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 that’s where you’ll find success — on the far side of failure.”

We profit from failure when we have the courage and willingness to face it and learn from it. But most of us have been conditioned to feel stupid when we make mistakes, and expect humiliation when our failures come to light. These attitudes keep us from learning from failure.

Arthur Gordon, the writer to whom 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 shifted. A project turned down, a lot of rejected manuscripts — 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,” said Gordon.

I’ve made three main points thus far:

Failure is part of the human condition. We all fail at times. Jesus and his disciples were no exception. The only difference among us is that some are willing to admit it and move on, while others deny it and can’t profit from it.

We need to redefine failure. One of our biggest mistakes is letting others define failure for us. Popular culture’s definitions of failure and success are too narrow and limited.

Failure is a teacher, and we can learn from it.

There’s one more point to be made. Above all, God judges our successes and failures differently from human judgments. What we consider a failure, God may judge a success. What we consider a success, God may see as a failure.

In the parable of the last judgment, as told by Jesus in the Gospel of Matthew, we learn that God does not judge success or failure based on what position we held, whether we made lots of money, or owned property, or had celebrity status. Those who are considered successful by God’s standards are those who fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed strangers, clothed the naked, and visited the sick or imprisoned.

Most of the most successful people by God’s standards remain anonymous in this world.

And here’s the best news of all: the love of God, as revealed in Jesus, can forgive any failure. No failure can place you beyond the loving care of God. God’s hand is always reaching out and is always ready to save sinking people. Amen.