Book 34

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 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.

Years ago, Dr. Elizabeth Kubler-Ross told of her early attempts to interview dying patients in a Chicago hospital. She discovered 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.

Could it be that some of us have trouble dealing with failure because we have a faulty understanding or inaccurrate 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 the failure of someone not recognizing 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. Most of us 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 home town and home synagogue to preach a sermon, 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." With this metaphor he was reminding them, when you meet disappointment and failure, leave it behind, don't carry it with you. Move on.

So 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.

About three or four years ago, Michael Jordan decided to quit professional basketball in order to try to make it in professional baseball. When he

made that decision the basketball team on which he had been playing, the Chicago Bulls had won three NBA championships. Michael Jordan told sportswriters who were skeptical about his decision to try professional baseball, "I am not afraid to fail." And fail he did as far as professional baseball was concerned. Then he returned to the Chicago 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. As a help in redefining failure and success, let's look at the story of the disciples in the boat on the Sea of Galilee and what happened when they get caught in a fierce storm.

Some of them were professional fishermen. They

had experienced storms before. Perhaps this was a bigger storm than usual. According to the Bible stories, "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 across 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 then when he started thinking about what he was doing, he became frightened and began to sink and Jesus had to hold onto him and help

him get back into the boat.

Peter didn't make it. He failed. Or did he? I think this story helps us redefine failure. Sometimes failure is not so much an event. It is the way we interpret or judge an event. It is a label we attach to it.

Jonas Salk attempted 200 unsuccessful vaccines for polio before he came up with one that worked. Someone asked him one time, "How did it feel to fail 200 times trying to invent vaccine for polio?" This was his response: "I never failed 200 times at anything in my life. I discovered 200 ways how not to make a vaccine for polio. I discovered 200 things that wouldn't work.

Someone asked Winston Churchill one time,

"What most prepared you to lead Great Britain through World War II?" Churchill"s answer was, "It was the time I repeated a class in grade school." The questioner said, "You mean you flunked a grade?" Church said, "I never flunked in my life. I was given a second opportunity to get it right."

Did Peter fail? In one sense, he did. His faith gave way. He started to sink. But there were eleven bigger failures in the boat. They failed privately. They failed 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 that the others never would, that when he sank, Jesus would be there.

In this matter of redefining failure or success, a large part of our problem is that we can let others define success or failure for us. What the culture calls failure or success may not be the best or ultimate measurement.

Is the movie that had the largest box office returns in ticket sales necessarily the best or most successful movie?

It is only the most successful in terms of the money it earned, but it could be a failure in other ways. Conversely, a movie or a book that has the most impact on the people who see it or read it may not be the best seller in terms of numbers.

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 one-half minutes might well consider it an outstanding accomplishment, but a world-class distance runner could view it as not a very good record. Judged by his teachers in his early schooling, Albert Einstein was a failure. Judged by the scientific community 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 same person is a failure as a parent, a lover and responsible family member.

In other words, sometimes our definitions of failure or success are inadequate or too narrow.

Furthermore in judging our own performance, it is not uncommon to use a more demanding criterion for ourselves 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 failure and success in regard to ourselves, but we also are not always good judges of others, particularly our contemporaries. 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.

When Harry Truman was President of the United States, and for a number of years thereafter, he was thought to have been very low in his ranking compared to other U.S. Presidents. But as the years have passed, it is becoming increasingly clear that he was a very good President and before that an outstanding U.S. Senator.

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

Years ago when an aspiring young writer interviewed IBM president, Thomas J. Watson, he was given some unusual but good advice. "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. 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."

You can profit from failure when you have the courage and willingness to face your 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 and they keep us from learning from our failures.

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, a new definition. "Somewhere inside me a basic attitude 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," according to Gordon.

I have made three main points in this sermon thus far: 1) failure is a 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 of us are willing to admit it, and go on with life, while others deny it and in so doing are not able to profit from it or to receive forgiveness from those they have hurt.

2) The second point is that the best way to deal with failure in addition to admitting it, is to redefine it. One of our biggest mistakes is to let others define failure for us. The popular culture's definition of both failure and success is always too narrow and limited.

3) The third point is that one of the most powerful ways of defining and understanding failure is to see it as a teacher, and then you can learn from it.

There's one more point to be made. Remember above all, God judges our successes and failures quite differently from many of 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 learn that God does not judge success or failure according to what position we had in life, or whether or not we made lots of money, or owned all kinds of property or whether or not we had celebrity status.

Those who are considered successful according to God's standards are those who fed the hungry, gave drink to the thirsty, welcomed the stran-

ger, clothed the naked and visited and cared for those who were sick or in prison. Furthermore, most of the most successful people according to God's standards remain forever anonymous in this world.

And here's the final best news of all. The love of God as revealed in Jesus, can forgive any failure. There is no failure that can place you beyond the loving care of God. God's hand is always reaching out and is always adequate to save sinking people. Amen.