Sunday, August 8, 1999
FAITH DEFICIT DISORDER
Matthew 14:22-33

In the first sermon in this series, which was given on the weekend of June 5-6, I noted that the time we live in is filled with all kinds of "disorders." The most discussed, and perhaps controversial, is "Attention Deficit Disorder" (ADD).

Just this past week, I received another new book on the subject. The title is Scattered, and the subtitle is How Attention Deficit Disorder Originates and What You Can Do About It. The author, Dr. Gabor Mate, a physician who has done considerable research on the subject, maintains that ADD is not, as many people believe, an inherited genetic condition. What causes ADD, according to him, is the interaction between genetic predispositions and environmental factors. Furthermore, Dr. Mate says that diagnosis is not destiny. He believes this disorder can be overcome, and he gives many examples as evidence.

In this age of "disorders," I've come up with my own list. The first sermon in this series was titled "Vision Deficit Disorder." I defined vision deficit disorder not in terms of the kind of vision deficit that can be corrected by wearing glasses or contact lenses or having some form of laser eye surgery. People who have the type of vision deficit disorder I was describing are those who have "tunnel vision." They never see the larger picture. They have a narrow view of life. They tend to place everything in rigid categories. They cannot easily accept change, even when it's for the good. They have no vision of a better future and refuse to enlarge their understanding of God and how God works.

In future sermons, some of the possible themes are: commitment deficit disorder, priority deficit disorder, character deficit disorder, gratitude deficit disorder, and joy deficit disorder. Today's sermon is on "faith deficit disorder."

Here are some of the symptoms of "faith deficit disorder." You might have faith deficit disorder if you have little faith in your own abilities and also lack faith in the abilities of others. A related symptom is the unwillingness to take risks, to try anything new because of the fear of failure.

Faith deficit disorder can come and go. You can develop this disorder at any point in your life, and you can also overcome it. It's not a once-and-for-all condition.

Some years ago, Dr. Warren Bennis, a Distinguished Professor of Business Administration at the University of Southern California, conducted an in-depth study of 90 leaders from a variety of organizations and backgrounds. His goal was to discover the characteristics that allow some people to become outstanding leaders.

He found that those who were exceptional leaders in their fields had much in common. They took risks without dwelling too much on the downside. They saw error not as failure but as an opportunity for 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 didn't think about failure. They didn't even use the word, preferring synonyms like mistake, glitch, or bungle.

“One of them said during the course of an interview, ‘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 ever thought about that, and it seemed to me that he put all of his energy into not falling rather than on the tightrope.”

Mrs. Wallenda went on to say that her husband even personally supervised the installation of the tightrope, making certain that the guy-wires were secure — something he had never 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 focusing on the positive action and goal of walking the tightrope, he was destined to fall. His extreme fear of failure led to a faith deficit.

In all of his previous tightrope walks, which combined vision, training, persistence, consistency, and self-confidence, Wallenda had concentrated on the positive. He always knew falling was a possibility and took that into consideration, but it was not his main focus. Because of his skill and experience, he had the faith that he could succeed.

We are all subject to faith deficit disorder at different points in our lives, and the disciples of Jesus were no exception. The story of the disciples getting caught in a storm on the Sea of Galilee is a good example. Some of them were professional fishermen, so maybe this was a more terrifying storm than usual. According to the Bible story, “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.” These assuring words had their effect. They began to calm the storm that was raging inside the minds of the disciples.

I can remember, as can most of you, waking up as a child because of a violent thunderstorm and being very much afraid. Then my mom or dad would come in and say, “It’s okay, everything is going to be all right.” The storm outside continued, but the storm inside of me calmed down.

Peter was so inspired by the comforting words of Jesus that he said, “Teacher, 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 across the water toward Jesus. He was doing fine until he began to worry about sinking. He made the mistake of looking down and realized what he was doing. As soon as he began to concentrate on not sinking, he began to sink.

It happens to all of us. When we begin to focus on the fact that we might fail, it frequently becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. 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 find ourselves doing things with incredible strength that we never knew we had. But 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 — we may very well be

subject to faith deficit disorder. The good news is that faith deficit disorder can be overcome, and the first step in doing so is to shift our concentration from not failing to focusing on a positive goal.

Another step in overcoming faith deficit disorder is to redefine failure. Peter didn't make it. He failed — or did he? This story helps us redefine failure. Sometimes failure is not so much an event as 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 once asked him, "How did it feel to fail 200 times trying to invent a vaccine for polio?" His response was, "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?" Churchill answered, "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, and he started to sink. But there were eleven bigger failures in the boat. They failed privately. Their failure was safe and unnoticed. They were afraid to get out of the boat. Only Peter experienced the shame of public failure. Only Peter knew the 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 this matter of redefining failure or success, a large part of the problem is that we 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 necessarily the best or most successful movie? It may be the most successful in terms of gross return, but is it the most successful according to other criteria? Conversely, a movie or book that has the most positive impact on those who see or read it may not be the bestseller in terms of numbers or dollars.

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 view it as subpar. Judged by his early schoolteachers, Albert Einstein was a failure. Judged by the scientific community for his later accomplishments, he was acclaimed a genius. A person who commands a large salary will most likely be perceived as a success. But during a divorce proceeding, that same person may be claimed as a failure — as a parent, a lover, or a responsible family member.

There are many times when our definitions of failure or success are inadequate or too narrow.

Another way to overcome the fear of failure and thereby correct our faith deficit disorder is to remember that we often learn more from failure than from success.

Years ago, when an aspiring young writer interviewed IBM president Thomas J. Watson, he received some unusual but good advice. "It's not exactly my line," said Watson, "but would you

like me to give you a formula for success in writing? It's quite simple: 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. 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. Go ahead and make some mistakes. Make all you can. Because that's where you'll find success — on the far side of failure."

There is one other factor in correcting faith deficit disorder. Two ways to do this are by redefining failure and learning from failure. And that's exactly what Peter and the other disciples did in this story. Once you do this, you are no longer as afraid to take risks, and you cannot build a strong faith without taking risks in the same way you cannot build strong muscles without exercising.

The difference between passive belief and strong, active faith is the difference between staying in the boat and taking no risks or getting out of the boat, especially when someone you trust invites you to do so.

All of us have problems, worries, and fears at one time or another. Some of us have failed many times. All of us have faced storms in life; we have struggled against the wind and the waves. What do we do with these fears and worries? Do we let them fester and grow, sitting there and groaning in self-pity? Or do we get out of the boat and begin to change our lives because God calls us to do so? That's the best way to begin to correct our faith deficit disorder.

I don't know what overcoming your faith deficit disorder might mean for you. It could mean taking action to begin recovering from an addiction, reconciling with someone at home or at work, rebuilding your marriage, or learning a new skill. Sometimes we have to get out of the boat to deal with our faith deficit disorder. Amen.