Sunday, May 22, 2005
MISTAKES OR FAILURES
Matthew 14:22-31; Luke 17:5-6

When you make an error, do you tend to see it as a mistake or as a failure? How you define an event can be more important than you realize. Here's a simple example of the power of words: you have a pet dog that you love very much. That dog has been an important part of your life for many years. Your pet is now very ill and suffering, with no chance of a cure. You take your pet to a veterinarian to be "put down" or "put to sleep." You wouldn't say, "I am taking my dog to be killed." Kill is a harsh word; there is no mercy in it.

The word "failure" carries a stronger negative tone than the word "mistake." I was reminded of this last week when I came across a book that I read many years ago. The book is An Invented Life by Warren Bennis. I was privileged to meet Dr. Bennis 12 years ago when he received an honorary degree from Doane College in Crete. At that time, he was a distinguished professor of Business Administration at the University of Southern California.

One chapter in his book inspired the title for this sermon because he points out the difference between understanding something as a mistake compared to thinking of it as a failure. Years ago, Dr. Bennis conducted an in-depth study of 90 recognized leaders from a variety of organizations and backgrounds. He wanted to discover some of the characteristics that made them successful.

One of the people he studied was Karl Wallenda, the famous high-wire aerialist. He discovered 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 errors. Like Karl Wallenda, the famous high-wire aerialist who once said, 'The only time I feel truly alive is when I'm on the wire.' These leaders poured all their energies into their task. They simply didn't think about failure, didn't even use the word, relying on synonyms such as mistake, glitch, bungle, or countless others like false start, mess, or error. Never failure."

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 might 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 obsession with not falling that led to his fall. For three months prior to the event, he thought about falling. It was the first time he'd ever thought about that, and it seemed to her that he put all his energy into "not falling" instead of walking the cable.

She went on to say that her husband even went so far as to personally supervise the installation of the cable, making sure the guy-wires were secure, something he had never done 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 cable, he was virtually destined to fall. The “Wallenda factor,” which had been present and working in all of his previous walks, was absent this time.

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

The difference between mistakes and failure came to mind as I began studying this story from the gospel of Matthew, where Jesus appears walking on the water toward his disciples, who were in distress. They were at first afraid, but when they saw him and he spoke to them, their fear subsided.

Peter was so inspired that he wanted to walk on the water to meet Jesus, and at Jesus’ invitation, he began to do so. He was doing fine until he started worrying about sinking. He made the mistake of looking down and realizing 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, he began to sink. It’s the exact opposite of the Wallenda Factor. When you begin to focus on failure, it frequently becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy.

There are times in life when your faith is strong, and you feel like you can walk on water or a tightrope — that is, you can be on top of a problem and not panic. You can even find yourself doing things you never thought you could do before. But then, if you stop in the middle of what you are doing and begin to worry — if you begin to concentrate on not failing instead of continuing to progress toward your goal — then you may very well begin to fail. Such is the power of negative thoughts.

According to the Bible, the negative thoughts of people around you can affect you. There’s a story in the gospel of Matthew where the power of negative thoughts in the crowd around Jesus seemed to hinder his ability to perform miracles. 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. Matthew says, “They took offense at him.” They were jealous and doubting. Matthew then adds, “And he could not do many deeds of power there because of their unbelief.”

The people of Nazareth had seen him grow up. Since they were familiar with his past, they thought they knew all about him in the present. Familiarity breeds contempt. This can happen to you as well.

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

Ray Meyer, as a university basketball coach at DePaul University, had forty straight 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 and not on not losing.” Tiger Woods must have felt the same way after his record-setting streak of making the cut in 142 golf tournaments. Now he can concentrate on winning rather than on not making the cut.

If you've ever played golf and had to hit the ball over a water hazard, you know you have two choices. You can concentrate on not hitting the ball into the water — and you probably will. Or you can concentrate on the joy and beauty of hitting a high, soaring ball, and the odds are you'll hit it over the water.

Jesus invites you to have a positive and active faith instead of concentrating on not failing. Remember that parable Jesus told about the talents? A man, going on a journey, left five talents with one servant, two talents with another, and one talent with a third servant. The servant with five talents traded with them and made five more. The servant with two talents invested and made two more. But the fellow with the one talent buried it for safekeeping in the ground. He concentrated on not failing. When the master returned, he commended the servant who had made five talents more and the servant who had made two more. But he was angry with the one who buried his in the ground. He in effect said to this servant, "There is no excuse for yielding to the temptation of safety in the use of your abilities."

In a similar fashion, a hypochondriac is a person who focuses on not getting sick rather than on staying well and enjoying life. He lives in fear, constantly worrying about being infected by some bacteria or virus. Any little pain or symptom causes him to withdraw in fear. He spends all his time avoiding illness rather than enjoying good health. Remember the epitaph the hypochondriac had on his gravestone: "I told you I was sick."

On the other hand, it is now known how much a positive attitude can contribute to good health, both mental and physical. The body will exert all kinds of healing power on its own behalf if you genuinely believe you are going to get well and if you concentrate on the positive aspects and the joy of healthy living rather than on the fear of sickness.

Jesus always invited his followers to focus on the joy of doing good rather than concentrating on avoiding evil. Jesus invites you to have a vibrant and active faith. One day he told his disciples, "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."

What then can you learn from the ministry of Jesus about the difference between mistakes and failures? First, when you make an error, see it as a mistake from which you can learn, rather than a failure where all is lost. Remember, it's also possible to see an error as a mistake instead of a failure and not learn from it. I like Einstein's definition of insanity: "Insanity is doing the same thing over and over again and expecting different results."

Second, according to Jesus, you learn best and begin to have an active faith that emphasizes positive results instead of concentrating on not failing when you develop appreciation and gratitude.

I read somewhere that no amount of material possessions produces true wealth. Enjoying and appreciating what you have, no matter how little or how much, is what makes you wealthy. Jesus teaches you to never let the things you can't have or don't have spoil your enjoyment of the things you do have and can have. Amen.