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 is suffering and there is no chance of a cure. You take your pet to a veterinarian to be "put down" or "put to sleep." You would not say, "I am taking my dog to be killed." Kill is a harsh word, there is no mercy in it.

The word "failure" carries with it 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 did an in-depth study of 90 recognized leaders from a variety of organizations and backgrounds. He wanted to discover some of the

most important characteristics that allow people to do extraordinary things.

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

walk the high-wire,' 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 or glitch or 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 might remember that Karl Wallenda fell to his death in 1978, while walking a 75 foot high tight-cable 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 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 for this one time absent.

In all the of the hundreds of previous walks on the tight-cable, Karl Wallenda possessed a combination of vision, persistence, consistency and the self-confidence necessary for successful tight-rope 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

in their boat because of a sudden storm that had come up. 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 the invitation of Jesus 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 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.

You've had that experience. There are times in the storms of life when your faith is strong and you can walk on water or walk on a tight-rope. That is, you can be on top of the problem and not panic. You can even find yourself doing all sorts of things that 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 seem

to have hindered 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 home town 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

had dulled their sensitivity and closed their minds. This can happen to you.

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 De Paul 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’ve felt the same way

this last weekend after failing to make the cut after 142 golf tournaments, a new record. Now he can concentrate on winning rather than not making the cut.

If you have ever played golf and you have to hit the ball over a water hazard, you have two choices, you can concentrate on not hitting the ball in 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, the hypochondriac is a person who focuses on not getting sick rather than on staying well and enjoying life. He lives in fear. He

is always afraid, afraid 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 in 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, 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 you concentrate 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 what Warren Bennis calls the Wallenda Factor.

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 failure and not learn from it. I like Einstein's definition of insanity. "Insanity is when you continue to repeat over and over the same practice, hoping to get different results."

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

I read somewhere that no amount of material possession produces true wealth. Enjoying, appreciating what you have, no matter how little or how much it might be, 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.