

Sermons at First Church

A Ministry of the Word
January 15, 2017
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First Presbyterian Church
Clarksburg, WV
Isaiah 49:1-7

But I said, "I have labored in vain, I have spent my strength for nothing and vanity; . . ."
 (Isaiah 49:5 N.R.S.V.)

Dealing with Failure

Comedian Rodney Dangerfield was famous for his, "I don't get no respect" lines, lines like this:

Last month we had a fire in the house and my kids are yelling, "Fire, fire," and my wife is telling them, "Shut up, Dad's sleeping."

I told my psychiatrist, "I have suicidal tendencies." Now he is billing me in advance.

I'm on the airplane, and this guy is showing me pictures of his kids - - they're my kids!

I sent my picture to a lonely hearts club. They sent it back. They said, "We're not that lonely."
 (January, February, March 2005, Dynamic Illustrations, "Loser")

Dangerfield made joke out of his failures. But to most of us failure is not a joke. What do we do with failure? As Christians aren't, we supposed to go from victory to victory? In Christ we are all overcomers, right? Paul says in Philippians 4:13 "I can do all things through him who strengthens me." And Jesus himself says that if we ask anything in his name it will be granted. Aren't we supposed to always be the David who overcomes Goliath?

Yes all of those things are true, but it is also true that we will experience failures. Sometimes it seems that we go from failure to failure repeatedly. What are we to do with failure?

The first thing I want to note is that the experience of failure, doesn't make you a failure. You are a precious child of God. You are of infinite value. Nothing that happens to you in this world can change that.

I also want to note that every follower of God experiences failure. I'm not talking about brief moments of unhappiness. I am talking about crushing defeat. Some of the great saints have referred to these times of failure as "the dark night of the soul."

Look with me at our Old Testament Lesson from Isaiah 49. Isaiah was one of the great prophets

of Old Testament times. His words are read in every Christian church around the world every Christmas, “For a child has been born for us, a son given to us; authority rests upon his shoulders; and he is named Wonderful Counselor, Mighty God, Everlasting Father, Prince of Peace.” (Isaiah 9:6) In the first part of our text, Isaiah says that he was called to be a prophet before he was even born. That all sounds wonderful doesn’t it?

Why is it then that when we get to verse four that this mighty chosen prophet of God says, “I have wearied myself in vain. I have used up my strength for nothing.” It’s easy to miss that part and skip quickly ahead. Because we know that Isaiah’s words would play a large part in sustaining the Jewish remnant in exile in Babylon. We know that Isaiah’s words continue to be a source of comfort and strength for millions even today.

Yet, at least for a period of time, Isaiah felt like an utter failure. He felt like he had worked as hard as he could and had absolutely nothing to show for it.

Now just in case you think this is mostly a preacher text because it talks about someone being called by God. Let me point out that at baptism we each received the assurance of salvation. The word salvation means healing, rescue, and saving. It also means being called. We all have a job to do.

As Christians we are called to witness to others of the good news of salvation in Jesus Christ. And we are called to do good works of love and caring. Those aren’t optional things. And we often feel like failures in those areas.

Again I point out to you that the fact that we feel like a failure, or even that we have failed at some particular task, does not make us failures. In fact just the opposite could be said. If you have never failed then you have never attempted something new, something risky, something great for God. Wil Williom even goes so far as to say, “Failures? (Are) a sign of initiative, creativity, a sure sign of faith.” (January, February, March 2017, Pulpit Resources, pg. 11)

Even Jesus himself got discouraged. In John chapter 6 we read about a time when Jesus had given a particularly hard saying and most of the people following Jesus quit following him. Listen to the conversation that Jesus has with the disciples right after that: “So Jesus asked the twelve, ‘Do you also wish to go away?’” Simon Peter answered him, “Lord, to whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life. We have come to believe and know that you are the Holy One of God.” (John 6:67-69)

Jesus was discouraged. Now, you would think that after Peter gives that glowing response that Jesus would then be back on track. Instead he responds, “Did I not choose you, the twelve? Yet one of you is a devil.” (John 6:70) As if to say, “If I am so great, how come I can’t even pick 12 good men as disciples?”

If Jesus himself experienced failure, you can be sure all of us will to. So what are we to do with failure?

The first thing to remember is that we don't see the whole picture as God does. Remember how depressed Elijah was when God spoke to him on the mountain in a still small voice? You'll find that story in I Kings 19. So God says, "What are you doing here hiding in a cave, Elijah?"

Elijah says, "I have worked my behind off for you God. I have done everything you asked me to do. And I have nothing to show for it, nothing! The Israelites have forsaken your covenant, and torn down your altars. I am the only one left, and I have had it. You might as well just kill me and be done with this whole sorry mess." (Yes, I am paraphrasing a bit there).

Then God tells Elijah that all is not lost. God still has seven thousand followers in Israel and he rewards Elijah's faithfulness by sending him right back into the thick of things.

Not only will we experience failure, but God also has a way of using even our failures. I remind you also of the story of Joseph. His jealous brothers sold him into slavery and told their father that a wild animal had killed him. Later in Egypt, the wife of Joseph's master tried to seduce him. But he did the right thing and ran away from her. She then told her husband that Joseph had tried to force himself on her. And Joseph got thrown into prison.

I don't know about Joseph, but had I been in his place, I would have been second guessing myself like crazy. Why couldn't I have been a little more clever, or faster? And of course, I would have been asking, "What did I ever do to deserve this?"

It turns out that Joseph is asked to interpret a dream for the pharaoh and thus gains not only his freedom but also a high place in the government. God uses Joseph in that high place to save the rest of Joseph's family when a famine strikes their land. If we are faithful God can and does use even our failures for his glory.

As Christians we know from God's word that we can expect to experience failures, it goes with the territory. We also know that we don't see the whole picture and that God can use even our failures for his glory.

How do Christians deal with failure? First we recognize that it comes with the calling. Experiencing failure does not mean you are a failure, it means that you are trying that you are being faithful.

Second, we don't see the whole picture, God does. And God can use even our failures to his glory.

Third, we remember that we are not the only ones working for the kingdom. As wise man once said, "Good teachers have got to be in love with planting the seed: they don't need to be there for the harvest." Even though that quote is about teachers, I think it applies to all of us Christians. Every loving act, every cheerful witness, every word we speak has the potential to be a seed that God will grow into a mighty oak.

I remember something that one of the members of my home church said one day. She was talking about how when she was a little girl, she used to go out in the woods and sit on a stump and pray.

She would ask God what he wanted her to be in life.

For some reason, or should I say with God's help, that witness stayed with me. I was just a young teenager at the time, but that witness started me down the path to becoming a pastor. There were a lot of other people that God used along the way, my pastor, my Sunday School teachers, my parents and grandparents, my seminary professors and the list goes on.

We are not the only ones working for the kingdom and we may never see the harvest. So we need to learn to love planting the seeds.

Our text from Isaiah gives us another clue on how to handle failure. Right after Isaiah complains that he has labored in vain, and spent his strength for nothing, he goes on to say that “. . . surely my cause is with the Lord, and my reward with my God.”

It is tempting to measure our success or failure from the visible, positive results of what you have accomplished. Yet, the real reward is from God and God alone can judge the fruit of your work. We are not called to be successful - most certainly not by any worldly standard. We are called to be faithful. We are called to give our best effort, to never give up, and to depend on God.

So today if you are feeling down, if you are depressed, if you feel like you have failed and failed again. That does not mean that your faith is weak or that your work is in vain. Failures are part of the journey, yes, but they are never the last word. God has the last word, a true word, a word worthy of all our trust and faith.

Just because you feel like a failure does not mean that you are a failure. You are a chosen, precious, much loved son or daughter of God.

In our text for today, God speaks to the despairing prophet, the failed prophet Isaiah. “Kings will see and stand up; commanders will bow down on account of the Lord, who is faithful, the holy one of Israel, who has chosen you.”

Amen.