

“A Salute to Failure” Reprise
 Sermon – Bedford Presbyterian Church
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Note: I first preached this sermon at Bedford Presbyterian Church in February 2004. This is an edited, revised version of that sermon.

Scripture Reading: Matthew 14:22-33

22 Immediately he made the disciples get into the boat and go on ahead to the other side, while he dismissed the crowds. ²³ And after he had dismissed the crowds, he went up the mountain by himself to pray. When evening came, he was there alone, ²⁴ but by this time the boat, battered by the waves, was far from the land, for the wind was against them. ²⁵ And early in the morning he came walking towards them on the lake. ²⁶ But when the disciples saw him walking on the lake, they were terrified, saying, ‘It is a ghost!’ And they cried out in fear. ²⁷ But immediately Jesus spoke to them and said, ‘Take heart, it is I; do not be afraid.’

28 Peter answered him, ‘Lord, if it is you, command me to come to you on the water.’ ²⁹ He said, ‘Come.’ So Peter got out of the boat, started walking on the water, and came towards Jesus. ³⁰ But when he noticed the strong wind, he became frightened, and beginning to sink, he cried out, ‘Lord, save me!’ ³¹ Jesus immediately reached out his hand and caught him, saying to him, ‘You of little faith, why did you doubt?’

I was listening to my favorite radio show, *This American Life*, when I heard the following story:

Ira Glass was interviewing a man named Charles Monroe Keene. Charles was telling Ira the story of when he was 22 years old and went as a protestor to the G7 conference in Munich in 1992. G7, now G8, is a major economic conference for heads of state of the major industrial democracies.

At the time, Charles was a seminary student, who left school because he wanted to practice liberation theology, not just talk about it. He and some of his friends decided to go to the G7 summit to protest. Somehow, he managed to finagle the

highest level press pass, to attend the presidential press conference. The President at the time was George Bush, the first.

His friends, more experienced activists, were stunned that he had gotten the pass, and told him that he must not let this golden opportunity go by – that he had to do some political action, make a statement, get arrested. Charles said, “I had no idea what I wanted to say. They said, the most important thing is to keep your hands away from your body while you do this so you don’t get shot. And you’re going to get 20 or 30 seconds max before they arrest you, so know what you’re going to say. I said, all I know is Christianity. They said, you can go with that. Americans relate to that. You know, I always wanted to be one of the Old Testament prophets. I thought that would be really cool. My favorite prophet was Jeremiah and Jeremiah had a certain style. I thought about it and thought about it and I came up with this great line: ‘The homeless in the trees are mourning your economic decisions. Repent dear king or go to hell.’”

Ira Glass, the interviewer, asks, “Looking back, 12 years later, what do you think of that line?”

And Charles says, “I can’t think of anything worse. It was terrible. It’s so embarrassing. But I was 22. It was the best I could do, so I practiced it over and over again.”

So he practices his line and he can’t sleep that night and goes to the press conference so nervous, he’s afraid he’s going to pass out or throw up. He positions himself in the middle of the press area so the secret service guys will have a harder time getting to him to arrest him. He expects to be arrested, and he has given his passport to a lawyer in preparation.

Finally the big moment arrives. President Bush has begun his opening statement. On the show I was listening to, they played a tape of the conference. Shortly after the president begins, you hear this little voice, barely audible, in the background. It’s Charles, making his statement about the homeless in the trees, but you can’t hear the statement. Mr. Bush stops his remarks and says, “Please sit down. We’re in the middle of a press conference here. And what’s your question sir?”

Charles is completely taken aback because he’s made his statement and hasn’t been arrested. He doesn’t know how to respond to the president’s question. He didn’t think he’d have to say anything else. He finally stammers out something

about being from a youth magazine and wondering why youth are not taken seriously. Mr. Bush responds “Well, maybe you’re rude. People don’t take rude people seriously. Sit down and I will take a question from you when we get to the question and answer period.”

Charles is now completely humiliated and feeling that this is the worst, most embarrassing moment of his life. Ira Glass says, “So you know at that point that you failed.” Charles, “Not only that, but I knew I was going to fail some more because he was going to ask me for a question and I had nothing to say. I didn’t have a question. I didn’t have anything to say.” The end of the story is that after Bush makes his statement he asks the “agitated young man” what his question is. Charles asks a totally stupid question, the other reporters start yelling at him, and he slinks away. At the end of the interview, he says, “I wanted to make a statement that would mean something, that would change the course of history and I totally failed.”

There’s something about that story that I totally love. The impetuosity of youth, the affectionate look back at one’s earlier folly, the realization that although you may have wanted to crawl into a hole and die of embarrassment, you didn’t and possibly learned something from your failure. And now, in your maturity, you can tell the story and laugh.

And so I started thinking about failure from a biblical standpoint and of course I thought of that most impetuous of disciples, Peter. It’s interesting to look at all the references to Peter in the four gospels. Peter is the one who is reprimanded by Jesus for refusing to believe Jesus’ description of his future trials. “Get thee behind me Satan,” say Jesus, “You are a stumbling block to me. . .” (Matt. 16:22-23) Peter is the one who, in his enthusiasm, effectively ends the transfiguration scene by interrupting Jesus as he talks with Moses and Elijah. Peter is among those disciples who fall asleep in the Garden of Gethsemane while Jesus is praying. Again, rebuked by Jesus, “You could not stay awake with me for one hour?” In the gospel of John, Peter is the one who, when Jesus is arrested, takes out his sword and cuts off the ear of the high priest’s servant. “Put your sword away,” Jesus said. Peter is the one who swears that even if all the others deny Jesus, even if he has to follow Jesus to the death, he will never deny Jesus. And as we all know, less than 12 hours later, he claims never to have met Jesus.

But my favorite story of the impetuous Peter is from today’s scripture reading. The disciples are in their little, open boat on a stormy sea. They see someone walking toward them, on the water, and they’re terrified. Jesus says “It is I,”

and tells them not to be afraid. Peter, the rash and courageous disciple, says, “Command me to come to you on the water.” Jesus says “Come” and Peter climbs out of the boat onto the stormy sea and begins to walk toward his friend and teacher. But what happens? When he’s halfway to his goal of reaching Jesus, reality kicks in. I imagine him out there, out on the water, focused only on getting to Jesus and doing fine, when suddenly that part of the psyche that we all share, the part that undermines us as we’re struggling toward a difficult goal, takes over. “What do you think you’re doing? You can’t walk on water! Only a god can walk on water! This is a stormy sea, you idiot and you are about to drown!” And so, of course Peter loses his focus, becomes afraid and begins to sink. Jesus reaches out a hand and saves him. Peter has failed.

There are many ways to interpret this story in terms of ecclesiology and Christology, but today I want to stick to the personal, because I think we need to be reminded from time to time of the value of failure. And Peter, with the possible exception of Jesus, is the most repeated and spectacular failure in the New Testament.

And yet, it is this Peter, Cephas, the rock, this impetuous, hot-tempered, blundering, sometimes foolhardy, sometimes cowardly follower who, according to the canonical Gospels, is chosen by Jesus to carry on his work. [9-1-13 addition: Since I wrote this sermon 9 years ago, I’ve read other historians of the early Christian movement who believe that Jesus actually intended to have his brother James carry on his work, but for today we’ll stick to the traditional understanding.] “Feed my sheep,” Jesus says to Peter at the end of the Gospel of John. Jesus recognizes in this fallible man the huge heart, the passionate desire for connection with God, the exuberance – the very qualities that have caused him occasionally to careen off in the wrong direction -- as the qualities needed to carry on the work that Jesus has begun. Peter’s very failures have helped to hone the character and create the maturity that Jesus has come to depend on.

I don’t know about you, but I need to be reminded from time to time to recognize failure as a crucial part of our lifelong learning. Here’s some wise advice I heard recently: If you’re going to fail, and we all will fail from time to time, don’t let your failure come from lack of trying, from fear, from compromise. Let your failure come with best effort, with full hearted commitment, with courage, with your integrity flags flying high. And then, if failure comes, learn from it, use it to move ahead, be grateful for it. Here’s a wonderful quote from Thomas Edison – “I have not failed. I have found ten thousand ways that won’t work.”

And here is another thing that I think we need to be concerned about. Our children. What I worry about for our kids is that they are born and reared to success. They're surrounded by it, they're bred for it, they're pushed – even if not by their parents, by their culture – to achieve it. And in *this* culture the parameters of success are pretty narrowly defined; and the external standards of success in this neighborhood are very high. I believe it's important, in fact it's crucial for kids to understand failure – to understand that there will always be failure and that's part of life; to know that it's OK to make a wholehearted attempt and to fail and that they're not risking losing anyone's love; that often we learn more from our failures than we do our successes; and that the culture's definition of failure may not be failure at all. Is there anyone here who has never failed at something? I don't think so. Our kids need to know that.

And what about Jesus? Wasn't he a failure? His people were looking for a messiah, whom they defined as a warrior king who would reestablish the golden age – the united kingdom of David. There were many who followed Jesus who were just waiting for his word and they would have taken up their swords against the Roman occupiers of their homeland. They believed that Jesus was the promised messiah. When he spoke, huge crowds gathered to hear his words. He was very powerful. Expectations were very high.

But instead of becoming a powerful king, Jesus was arrested, treated as a contemptible criminal and executed in the most degrading and humiliating way possible. If you had been standing on Golgotha that day, would you have considered his life a success or a failure? If you look at Jesus' life through the lens of success and failure as we judge ourselves and others today, you would see that once again, the whole purpose of his message was to turn our world upsidedown. To say, the external measures don't matter – life is not about what you have and what you are, but who you are – inside and in your relationship to God and to others. And that in fact the very categories of "success" and "failure" are spurious and, ultimately in our soul's true journey, irrelevant. Jesus lived and died this teaching and we would do well to learn it and learn it again. Not like an A student striving for success, but like human beings led by a profound teacher toward wisdom.