

“Facing Fear of Failure”

June 21, 2020

Unafraid series – Livestream – Father’s Day

We’re focusing on being unafraid – facing uncertain times with courage and hope. So, we’ve talked about fear – how fear makes us feel physically and emotionally, how fear can protect us from harm and how it can stop us from doing anything at all! Fear can even lead us to believe things that aren’t true – many unfounded fears, even to the point where we fear others and cannot love as God calls us to love because fear doesn’t allow us to love. Fear is a powerful motivator for action and inaction.

I took a quick survey on Facebook this week asking people, “What would you try if you knew you wouldn’t fail?” Or as a statement: Name one thing you’ve never tried for fear of failing. There are a lot of people who want to write or finish a book and start a business. Some said moving to a new place, going back to school, changing jobs or even careers, starting a new mission and ministry idea, and one asking for a promotion. Others said playing sports, going skydiving, speaking in front of people, singing a solo, playing an instrument, taking dancing lessons, recording songs they’d written, dieting, and one shared the regret of never asking out a person they’d liked in high school.

We have to be honest about the fears we struggle with, including failure. It’s hard to admit when we fail – when we let ourselves or others down. It’s hard to face societal and institutional failures as we face a global health crisis and injustice against communities of color that is long-standing. Voices protest what has been and call for something better – for change.

It’s hard to admit that we fear failure, too. But we have to face our fear of failure because we all have it. I fear failure, especially when it comes to tackling difficult topics and controversial issues, and I can work myself up about it. When I had to preach my first sermon to classmates at seminary, a professor offered good advice. He said, “You don’t have to preach a good sermon. You have to preach a sermon that will do somebody some good.” Now maybe he wasn’t talking about failure exactly, but his words have stuck with me.

Taking risks and being vulnerable is hard, but that’s a part of living our faith and living life! We fear failure because it can bring criticism, embarrassment, or even rejection. And even if we’ve had a lot of success, we tend to focus on the times we’ve failed. So rather than trying and failing and learning, rather than risking anything, we avoid action altogether – and sometimes stop ourselves from fully living into God’s call on our lives.

None of us wants to fail. It doesn't feel good, and it's not something that's celebrated. Sure we admire people who take risks and try new things, but we don't always recognize the reality of failure as a pathway to success. There's a powerful word about failure - **SHOW SLIDE: FAIL = First Attempt In Learning** – and that's true, but we don't want to admit it.

Failure isn't the opposite of success; it's a part of success. We saw it in the video, and there are more stories just like that. Actor Jack Lemmon is credited with saying, "Failure seldom stops you. What stops you is the fear of failure." Most of the time, it looks like this slide - **SHOW SLIDE: Arrows between TRY – FAIL – SUCCEED.**

We may not get it right the first time. We have to keep on trying, practicing, and learning. And our faith plays a role in all of this because we trust in God's grace. Even when we fail, even when others might be disappointed in us, we trust that God simply loves us. Our lives have meaning and purpose because we are God's beloved – all of us.

Scripture is full of examples of those who've been too scared to try, those who have tried and failed, and those who have triumphed. Facing our fear of failure is important in our larger faith story because fear of failure can stop us from following God's lead – usually going places we might never go and never experiencing the fullness of joy in following God.

Fear of failing can stop us from living our faith because faith commands that we take risks with God, which calls us to be vulnerable. Today we read two examples. When Moses encounters God, he faces an identity crisis when God tells him to go to Egypt. Moses wants to know who's sending him. He's unsure and needs some confirmation.

For Moses, going to the Egyptians and demanding that the enslaved be set free is probably laughable. Egypt is a powerful empire. Why would they listen to him? Why would Pharaoh care? Consider, too, that he's also in trouble. He killed an Egyptian, so there's no safe place for him.

Moses is like us sometimes. He doubts himself and God's call on his life. He just doesn't want to go, and he's got good excuses. *There's someone better. I'm not good enough.* But God's response is simply that Moses isn't going alone. God is with him – a powerful presence and creative force who cannot be contained simply by name.

This isn't about how good Moses is or how prepared he is or how much experience he has or anything else. God doesn't promise to make Moses brave enough or eloquent enough. When Moses meets God that day, God promises to be with him. One writer says, God's "revelation never satisfies human curiosity, but is an invitation to trust, to move out into the future with this God who will be there."

Perhaps that's a word for us as we consider how we trust God in living our faith in a time of a global health crisis and a call to hear the need for social justice as we seek

peace. We may struggle to let our faith speak boldly as we seek to love one another. But we can trust in God's presence.

And then there's David. God sent Samuel to anoint David even as Saul was king. Today we hear what King Saul is facing—this Philistine threat - a mighty army with advanced weapons ready to take land that God promised to Abraham and his descendants. Another battle ensues, and David's family is involved. His brothers are part of Israel's army, so he acts as a runner for their supplies.

As if the prospect of battle wasn't enough, there's Goliath. He's described in great detail—his stature, his armor and equipment. From some estimations, Goliath stood between 6 and 9 feet tall. His armor alone weighed between 80-120 pounds. He's a big man with a big mouth who taunts Israel and Israel's God. Every day he issues the same challenge for someone to fight him. Israel's army was scared. No one wanted to talk back or accept his challenge.

But David is different. Where Moses doubts his call, David seems overly confident. When David hears Goliath dishonoring God, he acts. He's not paralyzed by fear like the others, but is willing to stand and speak for God – and even offers himself to Saul as the one to fight Goliath. He tells Saul how God has been faithful in protecting him as he's cared for the sheep. David wants to defend God's honor and prove God's power to those who would deny it.

Saul tries to equip David with his armor to prepare him for Goliath who is covered with armor, but it isn't fit for David. Saul is sure that David needs armor to be successful in battle. But remember that God doesn't see as we see, but God looks on the heart. We tend to look on the outward appearance. Without physical armor, no one understands how David can be protected, but he is the one who will bring God's people into a new future.

Goliath sees a small man with a weapon to laugh at. Saul and the army see a small man with no chance against a huge man. Fear covers their ears to what David saying: "You come with weapons, but I come in the name of God." David's attitude reminds me of Dorothy Bernard words that I shared a few weeks ago: "Courage is fear that has said its prayers."

So we have David whose trust in God is bigger than his trust in himself. And we have Moses whose trust in himself (or lack of trust) is bigger than his trust in God. Both of them are called by God to lead. Both of them sent in God's name with power and authority that cannot be matched. Both of them grounded in God's grace even as they faced difficult odds.

Their story is a part of our faith story – and a call to face our fear of failure. Where do you find yourself today? What fears of failure do you have in this moment?

Pastor Adam Hamilton offers three things he's learned about facing failure – or at least the possibility of it:

1. Most things are never as hard as you fear they will be.
2. Successful people are willing to do things unsuccessful people are unwilling to do.
3. Discernment by nausea – taking the harder path.

How many times have we dismissed a possibility for sharing our faith because we're afraid? How many times have we missed an opportunity to speak and act our faith in Christ for fear of what will happen rather than trusting God to guide us in what we do and say? Has success become an idol? Do we care more about success than we do being faithful? It's easy to forget that Jesus - Lord and Savior – was considered a failure because his victory came through sacrificial love. No one looked at him as a success, and yet he's the One we put our faith in. He's the One we trust.

Faith is putting what we pray into action. That always matters, but as we seek to love God and love one another, our faith has to show in more than mere words or slogans or posts. We trust in God's grace – not in accolades from others – but to give us strength as a community of faith. We trust that God's love never fails - no matter what.

Thanks be to God. AMEN.

PRAYERS of the PEOPLE & the LORD'S PRAYER