

Jeremiah 31:31-34
Romans 3:21-28
John 8:31-36

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Reformation Sunday

Failure IS an Option

What would you do if you couldn't fail? If success were guaranteed.
What would you dare to try? What mission would you attempt, what venture would you risk, what great project would you undertake?

I love these kinds of questions - they stimulate our thinking, stretch our vision, and stir our imagination. But as much as I love these questions, I think their helpfulness is limited

Because the truth is, there will be failure. There just will. And if we only envision things we can accomplish **without** failure, we will either be sorely disappointed when we do fail, or we'll be so intimidated by the fear of failure that we'll never even try.

So in light of today's readings, and our lifting up of the Reformation, I want to ask another question - similar but perhaps both more realistic and more faithful:

What would you do if you knew you **might** fail and it **just didn't matter**?

And I don't mean "didn't matter" in the sense that there would be no cost, or that it wouldn't be difficult or disappointing. What I mean is, what would you try if the attempt itself was worth it whether it succeeded or not? Or, even more, what would you risk if the **ultimate** outcome was guaranteed even if your immediate venture failed?

I think that's a big part of what today's readings are about. We'll start with the Gospel of John and work our way backwards...

In this almost cryptic passage about Jesus' relationship to our freedom and our failures, Jesus invites us to imagine that belief in him brings the freedom that receiving an inheritance brings, rather than the insecurity of being a slave.

In the ancient world there was a harsh distinction between those who were "in" and those who were "out" of a family, its privileges and future. And Jesus is inviting all of us to claim an inheritance as children of God.

Because Jesus has secured our place with God the Father we are in every way free. Free to venture, to risk, to try ... and even to fail, Because it is God the **Son** who secures our place, position, and future. We are the receivers of an inheritance, NOT employees of a master.

So also in Romans, Paul declares that we are justified (made right with God) not by our works - that is, by our successes or accomplishments - but by grace (3:24). **And just as our accomplishments do not earn our place in God's kingdom, neither do our failures disqualify us.**

As Martin Luther, came to recognize so poignantly, if our salvation or God's love for us depended on our efforts, we would have no reason to hope. For as Paul says, and as each of us knows by experience, we have all sinned and fallen short. We all fail.

But in Jesus, God tells us that our identity, our worth, our well-being is not determined by our successes and failures but by God's gift alone. And precisely because our relationship to God is secure, and what he thinks of us is not up to us, but up to God, we are free to do and to try and risk all things in the meantime. Because whether we succeed or fail, God has promised to bring us and all things to a good end.

Still not sure? Then let's go to the prophet Jeremiah. Because in this brief passage the prophet, speaking for God, not only details Israel's absolute failure to keep the law, but also goes on to declare God's promise to do for Israel what they could not do for themselves by writing the law on their very hearts, by fashioning in them and through them a people of promise.

Even more, God says that when it comes to their - and our! - sin and failure, God will just plain forget, remembering our sin no more. That's right, despite everything God doesn't just forgive but also forgets. God develops a case of intentional amnesia when it comes to our sin and regards us as if we were perfect, blameless and whole.

Can we even imagine how huge that is?

A 21-year-old New Zealand woman experienced something along these lines years ago, when she was brought before a judge.

She had survived a suicide attempt, which was part of a suicide pact with her partner. Her partner, who was much older than she was, had been severely depressed for a couple years.

Her young friend had tried to persuade her to get professional help. But finally the older woman decided she couldn't handle living anymore, and so they entered into the suicide pact together.

The older woman completed her suicide herself but the young woman's attempt was unsuccessful. And so she was brought to court to face charges.

Only once before had a court passed judgment on someone in similar circumstances. In deciding what the sentence should be, the judge said he weighed two factors.

This is a sentencing to test the wisest and most experienced judge. This court must send a clear message on behalf of the community that life is a precious gift. Second, a court that delivers justice on behalf of the community must never abandon mercy. Any punishment beyond a conviction would serve no purpose, he said. Now that I've met you I see that you are a beautiful young woman inside and out. You must leave here and live, please. You are convicted and freed.

Wow – what a summary of the Christian faith!

We are convicted – we can't help but fail – all have sinned and fall short.

And we are freed – we are still right with God – we are justified by his grace as a gift.

So let me ask again: what would you do if failure didn't matter?

Would you work for justice, or peace, or equality, or any of the other handful of things that the world calls idealistic? Or maybe you would volunteer at a food pantry, or tutor a child who needs help at school, or befriend a kid who everyone says isn't cool, or visit an elder whom most have forgotten, or reach out to someone overwhelmed by grief even though you don't know what to say.

So often, these things, whether great or small, seem either so hopelessly impossible or so ridiculously insignificant that we don't try, we don't make the time.

But in the Kingdom of God there is no small gesture and there is no impossible deed. And for this reason we are free...even to fail, trusting that the God who raised Jesus from the dead will also bring all things. even our failed efforts, to a good end.

Remember the movie Apollo 13, and the great scene when NASA's Flight Director Gene Kranz (played by Ed Harris), boldly declares, "Failure is not an option." Well, as inspiring as that line is, I know the opposite is more often true: failure is regularly the option.

More to the point, if you're going to risk anything that matters, "not failing is not an option." Risk, you see, entails failure. Change entails failure. Creativity and innovation and experimentation all entail failure.

At the end of his life, Martin Luther lived in Eisleben, which was also the place of his birth, bringing his work and life, in a sense, full circle. After successfully negotiating disputes between several local magistrates, he preached his last sermon there.

You know how many people showed up to hear him preach? Only five people showed up for what would be Martin Luther's last sermon. And he was mad. He wrote a friend about it, despairing over what we feared was a "failed" reformation.

While I can understand his dismay and disappointment, I wonder if at that moment, Luther forgot that much of our energy and effort will be given over to failed endeavors. I wonder if he'd forgotten Paul's reminder that we have all sinned and fallen short ... and will keep sinning and falling short- failing.

You see, our hope rests not in our successes but in God's great failure on the cross, the failure that redeems all failures and successes, binding them together in the promise of resurrection. We sang about this in our opening hymn: (*A Mighty Fortress*, v.4)

*Let goods and kindred go, this mortal life also;
The body they may kill: God's truth abideth still,
His kingdom is forever.*

So let me ask again: what would you do if failure didn't matter?

What would **we** do as a church? What mission would we attempt? What venture might we risk? What great project should we undertake?

Perhaps faithfulness is trusting God enough to venture in a new direction, or try a new thing.

Remember, this is God's doing, and so we are free –
free to risk,
to dare,
to love,
to live,
to work,
to struggle,
and even to fail...all in hope.

So do not fear and do not give up. Keep the faith. Keep on trying and failing. For God has promised to keep hold of us, and to use us in ways we cannot imagine.

Amen.