

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Thy Will be Done: Expect Some Failures
The Rev. Bethany Peerbolte
October 31, 2021

Exodus 5:1-9; Matthew 17:14-21

The topic for today is a tough one the day after the MSU vs. UofM so I want to issue a trigger warning, especially for UofM fans that this sermon is about expecting failure. (I promise I would have made that joke if my Spartans had lost too).

Failure is a gigantic subject. If you put the word failure into google or a youtube video search you will get hundreds of hits. “How to avoid failure” “How to fail your way to success” “Learning from Failure” Our culture is obsessed with failing, probably because we have all experienced it and desperately want to avoid it.

It is a gift that Moses is not afraid of his failure. Or at least he isn’t afraid of it when he writes Exodus because he includes stories where he fails. He could have left those parts out and painted himself in a stronger tone, but Moses wants us to know failure will be part of the story. It was part of his story and the story of Israel and we should expect failure to be a part of our story too.

I really liked the way this passage read in the Message so let’s listen to this story one more time

After that Moses and Aaron approached Pharaoh. They said, “God, the God of Israel, says, ‘Free my people so that they can hold a festival for me in the wilderness.’”

2 Pharaoh said, “And who is God that I should listen to him and send Israel off? I know nothing of this so-called ‘God’ and I’m certainly not going to send Israel off.”

3 They said, “The God of the Hebrews has met with us. Let us take a three-day journey into the wilderness so we can worship our God lest he strike us with either disease or death.”

4-5 But the king of Egypt said, “Why on earth, Moses and Aaron, would you suggest the people be given a holiday? Back to work!” Pharaoh went on, “Look, I’ve got all these people freeloading, and now you want to reward them with time off?”

6-9 Pharaoh took immediate action. He sent down orders to the slave-drivers and their underlings: “Don’t provide straw for the people for making bricks as you have been doing. Make them get their own straw. And make them produce the same number of bricks—no reduction in their daily quotas! They’re getting lazy. They’re going around saying, ‘Give us time off so we can worship our God.’ Crack down on them. That’ll cure them of their whining, their god-fantasies.”

Moses and Aaron walk into Pharaoh’s court with extraordinary boldness. They don’t do any of the bowing or exulting or greetings we see at other times people enter powerful courts. They get right to the point “the Lord has said.” This is a power move for sure. Pharaoh thinks of himself as a god so to be told that another god is commanding him to do something is not going to go very well. That fact does not seem to bother Moses or Aaron. They start off with the command.

This immediately goes sideways. Pharaoh is offended they didn't greet him appropriately and they issue a command from another god with whom Pharaoh has no relationship. Of course, he is going to get defensive and snap back at the audacious duo.

Moses and Aaron see their mistake and try to do some damage control. They know if Pharaoh won't let them go the plagues will come but saying "you will be punished" is not going to be a great follow-up. So they try to illustrate that the Egyptians and the Israelites are all in this together. One big happy community that should be aware that "God will strike US with disease or death." Instead of saying God will strike "you", which is the truth, they soften the delivery and say, "us"

It's too little too late and Pharaoh issues an order that makes the brick labor harder without reducing the daily quota. This is not to say if Moses and Aaron came in bowing and bribing Pharaoh things would have gone differently. This is to say WHAT DID THEY EXPECT!?

In their wildest dreams did they actually think going in there and asking for a free weekend was going to work? I don't think so. I think they knew that was how the meeting was going to go. Maybe that's why they didn't bow, they knew it wasn't going to help anyway. They expected to fail. And they did.

But when they did fail it wasn't crushing because they were ready for it. When we expect to fail it softens the impact. Yesterday I was watching the football game with friends who were cheering for both sides. At the end of the third period though it sounded like we were all rooting for the same team because we all kept saying "we will find a way to lose this just you wait." We were protecting ourselves from the impact of losing by expecting to fail.

Acknowledging that failure is possible helps us deal with the blow that failure can throw at us. And it allows us to bounce back faster and stronger.

I heard an interview with a prisoner of war a few months ago and he was asked what the best survival technique is for those situations. He answered "be pessimistic" he went on to clarify "it was the optimistic ones who died first. They would count the days and say "we will be out by Christmas, this will be over by easter, we will be on the beach by the fourth of July" As their prediction dates passed they ran out of hope. He also said the pessimists didn't fare well either, especially after being rescued. It was the soldiers who expected to fail that made it through. The ones that expected success did not enjoy the days between Christmas and Easter because they were looking into the future. Then when the big day came and went they were crushed by the impact of failure. The ones who expected failure could shrug it off and prepare for the next day.

Leaving room for an expectation of failure helps us absorb the impact when we do fail and it also teaches us that failure is not the end of the story. People who expect to fail, and then fail, learn that the world goes on after failure.

You have probably heard the quote from Thomas Edison "I have not failed. I've just found 10,000 ways that won't work" That is the voice of someone who expects to fail. SO I failed, big deal, I'll try again.

My favorite quote about failure is from Henry Ford "Failure is simply the opportunity to begin again, this time more intelligently." This is what it sounds like to be a person who expects to fail. It's not the end, failure is one of the steps, maybe 10,000 of the steps, but it is just part of the process.

Moses and Aaron walk out of Pharaoh's court as failures. And it probably hurt a lot, but they kept going. They knew that was just the first step. The disciples on the other hand have not pushed through the failure as well in Matthew 17.

They tried to help the boy but failed. That failure derails their faith and they can not recover. They let their initial failure cloud every other attempt. They did not see failure as a learning experience. They didn't try a different prayer or maybe even try a second time they send the boy off and Jesus has to fix it. The disciples give up.

Jesus is not thrilled. "You faithless and perverse generation, how much longer must I be with you? How much longer must I put up with you?" It's a gut-wrenching thing to hear Jesus say. It's like a parent saying "I'm not mad, I'm just disappointed" UGH!

Then Jesus talks about the mustard seed. We use this section of scripture to empower and uplift. The mustard seed has become a symbol of power and success. Yet when we read this whole scene it's not a particularly uplifting moment.

Faith the size of a mustard seed yes but what else is in there with the mustard seed. A pumpkin seed of shame, an avocado seed of fear, a coconut of failure. The disciples are focusing on the wrong thing. They just see the failure and forget about the tiny seed of faith behind it.

Moses and Aaron were better prepared to notice the mustard seed. They kept trying. They knew failure did not mean an end to God's story and so it did not mean an end to their story. Jesus wanted the disciples to grasp this concept because he expected the failure his movement was about to face. Jesus wanted them to expect failure so that when he was put on a cross they would remember the mustard seed in the corner and hold on. Because in God's story failure is never the end, it is just a step towards the solution.

We must expect to fail. It will help us absorb the impact and we will bounce back stronger than before. We must expect to fail because what seems like a failure could, in three days, turn into the solution. Failure is never the end of the story.

If you feel like you are in the midst of failure, remember your mustard seed. The seeds of failure and shame and fear feel bigger than your faith and are incredibly distracting and discouraging, but all you need is a mustard seed-size faith. Those other seeds want our attention. Failure and shame want our resources to grow bigger and stronger.

But we can look at failure and say "I expected you to show up, Hello. If you would excuse me the seed behind you is the one I'm going to fertilize and help grow" Failure becomes less of a distraction when we expect it to be there and remember our story goes on after failure.

Jesus proved that failure is not the end of the story so let's stop allowing it to derail our efforts and our faith. Reassess, adjust the plan, try again, and water the mustard seed. Failure is to be expected and it is not the end of your story.