

Failing Well
By Jason Huff
Isaiah 43:16-25, Acts 28:23-31, Luke 9:37-50

Today's third Scripture reading comes from Luke 9:37-50. Listen now for God's Word to you. "The next day, when they came down from the mountain, a large crowd met him. A man in the crowd called out, "Teacher, I beg you to look at my son, for he is my only child. A spirit seizes him and he suddenly screams; it throws him into convulsions so that he foams at the mouth. It scarcely ever leaves him and is destroying him. I begged your disciples to drive it out, but they could not." "O unbelieving and perverse generation," Jesus replied, "how long shall I stay with you and put up with you? Bring your son here." Even while the boy was coming, the demon threw him to the ground in a convulsion. But Jesus rebuked the evil spirit, healed the boy and gave him back to his father. And they were all amazed at the greatness of God. While everyone was marveling at all that Jesus did, he said to his disciples, "Listen carefully to what I am about to tell you: The Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men." But they did not understand what this meant. It was hidden from them, so that they did not grasp it, and they were afraid to ask him about it. An argument started among the disciples as to which of them would be the greatest. Jesus, knowing their thoughts, took a little child and had him stand beside him. Then he said to them, "Whoever welcomes this little child in my name welcomes me; and whoever welcomes me welcomes the one who sent me. For he who is least among you all--he is the greatest." "Master," said John, "we saw a man driving out demons in your name and we tried to stop him, because he is not one of us." "Do not stop him," Jesus said, "for whoever is not against you is for you."

This hasn't been the greatest week on the news front. North Korea is yelling at the world, three incredibly famous celebrities died, and sandwiched inbetween it all was the news: Jon and Kate split. Some of us have never watched their show "John and Kate + 8." In fact, for a long time I don't think I even knew that The Learning Channel where their reality show is broadcast even existed! But between the tabloids you can't help seeing at the grocery store and the newspaper and the Internet, most all of us have heard of them. Sadly, other peoples' failures have become our entertainment. Regular viewers of the show have said this was a long time coming, but that doesn't stop the tragedy of how they and their eight children will sadly have to suffer the consequences of their failed marriage.

While we look at it and sigh, we often wonder about our own failures. Why are relationships and marriages so fragile? Even getting outside that realm, failure is a worry many of us share. We worry that we will fail economically, that we won't have the money we need to make it because of bad choices we've made. We worry that we're failing in our careers, failing as parents or as students, failing spiritually. Failure hits us hard.

Today's story from the Bible talks about four particular failures that the disciples made. This is a point where their own human failings come to light. And yet, when we understand the mistakes they made and understand the places where they stumbled, the Holy Spirit can guide us to begin avoiding their errors. Maybe the biggest surprise to me as I studied this passage this week is that while their failures may look nothing like ours on the outside, the roots of their failures are exactly the same.

There's one thing we have to keep in mind before we study this passage, and that's the realization that many things we might consider failures that we feel guilty about are just part of living life on a flawed planet with flawed human beings that have been affected by humanity's fall. Just in the span of 48 hours, my air conditioning failed, my car failed, and the power failed. There's nothing I could really do about any of them. They might ruin my day, they might shorten my sermon prep time, they might make it hard to sleep at night. But these failures are not my own. In the same way, a lot of people right now are out of work, and often when we aren't working, we feel like we've failed. But that's simply not true. When can do all we can and have no guilt and still not have a job. Same goes for those who've lost some of their health care or benefits with the recent automaker pension problems. When we study the whys and whats and how-not-tos of failure, we have to be willing both to be accountable for the actions we *can* control and to let go of those things that we simply *can't*.

So let's take a look at the four things this passage shows us about failure. First, *one root of failure is a reliance on one's self rather than God*. The passage starts with Jesus and his three closest disciples coming down from the mountain. They've had an incredible experience called the Transfiguration that we talked about last week. In many ways, it was like Moses' experience up on the mountaintop where he spoke with God and saw God's glory. This week, it's a lot like when Moses comes down the mountain and finds out that his fellow Hebrews have been worshipping a golden calf while he was gone. When Jesus returns, the first thing he hears about is a young man who is possessed by a powerful demon that has put him through all kinds of suffering. His father had asked Jesus' disciples to drive the demon out, but they couldn't do it. Just like Moses, Jesus comes back to find His followers have forgotten their first love.

Now without some context, it doesn't sound surprising. We expect Jesus to be the one doing the miracles, right? But if you remember a few weeks back, we studied the opening of this chapter of Luke, and at that point Jesus sent out the disciples on their first missionary journey. It said that He gave them power and authority to drive out all demons and to cure diseases. Jesus' power was with them. There was no reason they couldn't help this boy, but they couldn't. Why not? Luke doesn't give us a straightforward answer. Jesus' frustration with the disciples shows us that something has gone haywire with the way they're acting, but Luke doesn't spell it out for us. In Matthew and Mark's writings about this same event, Jesus tells the disciples that this kind of spirit only comes out through prayer and fasting. In Matthew, Jesus says that their lack of faith was another problem.

All three of the Gospels present the story as a situation where the disciples have attempted to get rid of the spirit, but they can't do it. They know they should be able to, but they aren't. And the root of it in every Gospel retelling is that they themselves are getting in the way. If they weren't practicing spiritual disciplines like prayer and fasting when Jesus was away, like Matthew and Mark said, why did they think that the power He had given them would be effective? Perhaps they thought of the power as some sort of magic rather than the power of God given to them precisely because they were relationship with Him. Maybe they thought the power was now their own to use as they wanted. But what's clear is that, when Jesus was away, the disciples who were left behind weren't in daily, close relationship with the Father. And they learned quickly that it simply doesn't work. There was nothing in and of themselves to rely on. Only God could be trusted to supply them with what they needed.

We see this kind of thinking in ourselves all the time. We've talked about it in church; it's nothing new. Self-reliance is a key to most of our own failures. If your life is centered around yourself and Jesus is a part of your story, eventually things will start falling apart. Because a self-centered marriage is only going to work while both people happen to have the same goals and objectives. As soon as those change, trouble is right around the corner. If your finances are self-focused rather than God-focused, no matter if you become a billionaire, you will never have enough. Someone will always be richer than you and own something you can't have. Even when we are helping others, if we're doing it to score points with God, how many points are enough? We can't earn our way into heaven. But turning to God can redeem all those things. If God is the center of our lives and we see ourselves as just one part of God's larger, unfolding story, then we are in the right place to find true contentment in our lives and relationships. When we realize that trusting in ourselves and turning inward just makes things worse, when we start relying on God to handle things, they won't turn around overnight. Some things may never turn around the way we would like. But we will be in right relationship with God, and with Him leading our way, our own self-interests become somehow less important.

Here's the second root of failure we see in this passage: *avoiding the difficult questions in life, both of God and others*. While everyone is gaping at Jesus' power in healing this young man, He tells the disciples, "Listen carefully – the Son of Man is going to be betrayed into the hands of men." Now Jesus often talked about Himself in the third person as the Son of Man; He did it so that His closest followers might comprehend what He was saying but that others wouldn't understand. But the disciples don't get it. While Jesus had talked about His death before, for Him to mention it right after this healing isn't logical. But the responsibility is placed back in the disciples' court because we are told they were afraid to ask about it.

The disciples asked Jesus questions and He asked them questions back. This kind of give and take was common to Jesus' teaching style. The disciples' fear wasn't because they were afraid of overstepping their bounds to ask Him a question. Their fear was finding out exactly what Jesus meant. The disciples wanted to ignore this hard question. Jesus had talked about His death before His transfiguration. No questions. Three disciples saw Jesus in stunning glory with Moses and Elijah, who talked to Him about His death. No questions. Here He talks about it again. No questions. It's the elephant in the room. And yet they still don't ask. Maybe it's because they couldn't bear the thought of their beloved teacher dying. Maybe they couldn't bear the thought of what it would mean for them and their lives. Or maybe they didn't want to deal with the ramifications of asking about it. When you start asking Jesus questions, often He hones right in and points out exactly where your thinking about God or relationship with God has gone wrong. Jesus' words are like a doctor who removes a tumor...it's really painful at first and requires a lifetime of follow-up, but that surgery can ultimately save your life. When Jesus answers our questions, we might be cut to the quick because our thoughts and attitudes come under the microscope...but if we take His words to heart, it leads to eternal life.

In our own lives, we too need to ask the hard questions. The pollsters tell us that most marriages that end in divorce are over problems with money, sex, children, jobs, or a combination of them. But these are all areas connected by one real and serious issue: a lack of communication. If we aren't willing to ask the difficult questions, we won't ever get to the bottom of our problems. And that's true for all situations and all relationships, not just marriage.

And when it comes to God, sometimes we're made to feel as if we should be shiny happy cheery people with no problems. But I tell you what...when I didn't have power and I didn't have a car and my family's out of town and I had no way to write my sermon and I was sweating to death and the car I finally borrowed from the Neebes got fender-bended in a hit and run – that's another story! – I asked the hard questions of God! Pretending to be happy about all of that is ludicrous! But when I look in the Bible, God answers me...God showed me that suffering is a part of the human condition. And what's more, He showed me this verse from 1 Peter 1:5-6: "In this you greatly rejoice, though now for a little while you may have had to suffer grief in all kinds of trials. These have come so that your faith--of greater worth than gold, which perishes even though refined by fire-- may be proved genuine and may result in praise, glory and honor when Jesus Christ is revealed." We all have trials, and most of them are common to everybody. But when we trust in God through them, our character is being strengthened. Painful? Yeah. But if Jesus suffered on the cross that I might be made acceptable to God the Father on the day of judgment, I can handle a few hours with no air conditioning and a car in the shop. So remember – ask the difficult questions of other people, and of God, and of yourself. Make communication a priority. Don't stop until you've worked out those trials, and you will escape this trap.

Third failure we see this morning: *our own self-importance*. You'd think after the disciples couldn't help the young man and Jesus had to intervene, they would have been knocked down a peg or two. But instead, they get into a fight over who's going to be greatest in the Kingdom of God. They're all worried about position and status. They want to be important. They want to be noticed and recognized. They want the world to see how great they are. They have an inflated picture of how important they are to Jesus' mission. So Jesus brought a young child to his side and said, "whoever welcomes this child welcomes me and the Father who sent me. For the least among you is actually the greatest." In that era, children were not valued at all. They gained value when they were old enough to work and earn their keep. Frankly, a lot of children died at an early age, and they were often seen as a nuisance and a mouth to feed. By doing what He did, Jesus was telling his disciples, "If you want to please me and my Father, you're going to have lower yourself and befriend the people nobody else will touch. People will look down upon you and think you're nothing because you do it, but that is what makes you great in God's Kingdom."

And that's a hard thing to do. We like status. When I first came here and everybody started calling me "Pastor Huff" or "Pastor Jason," it was weird. But there are times when it feels good to have a title. My mother-in-law pokes fun at me and calls me the "Reverend Mister." And it's good that she does that. Because the truth is, titles don't matter. At the beginning of the Reformation, John Calvin saw in the Bible that everybody's job was given to them by God. In medieval times, priests were seen as the "real" Christians doing God's sacred work and everybody else was second class in the Kingdom. But the Reformation helped us to see that a pipe cleaner and a president and a pastor are all on the same level before God. Every last one of us is a sinner in desperate need of God's grace, which He showed us through the sacrifice of Jesus Christ. Through that sacrifice, we are given the gift of salvation that we could never earn. Small, large, tall, short, smart, challenged, athletic, disabled, strong, weak...none of those labels mean anything to God. Romans 2:11 teaches us, "There is no favoritism with God." If we can avoid those labels and treat everyone we meet, no matter what their particular sins may be, with love and grace and respect, we can avoid this failure.

Fourth and last failure in this passage: *an inability to rejoice with others' godly success*. Jesus' disciples want to stop a guy who's driving out demons in Jesus' name. Apparently, they think that they alone should have this power. Jesus didn't officially give power to this guy, and yet his ministry in Jesus' name is effective. And Jesus says, in effect, leave him alone. He's not against you, he's for you! Once again, the disciples show off their own fears. They are afraid of being insignificant. They're jealous because this new man on the scene is more successful than they are! There is no good reason for them to want to stop him...he's not teaching lies, he's not deceiving people. But the disciples want to keep the authority for themselves. They can't rejoice that someone else is also a part of the work of the Kingdom of God.

This is something that plagues us too. It's hard to be happy when a friend gets a new job when I'm getting laid off. It's hard to see a family that gets along when ours is in turmoil. When our spiritual lives are low and it takes everything we have to read a couple Bible verses without crying, it's hard when a fellow believer talks about how great his walk with God is. But sometimes, we're jealous. We wish we got the raise or the new grandchild or the easy time of it. Sometimes, our lives are fine but we still begrudge somebody their success because they get all the breaks. And this is an attitude that will cause us to fail. Paul tells us in Romans 12:15, "rejoice with those who rejoice, and weep with those who weep." When we rejoice with others in their successes, it acknowledges not just their achievements but also that God is the giver of all good gifts. It turns around our way of thinking because it puts God in His rightful place at the front and center of our lives. Allowing the Holy Spirit to work this change in our lives also gives us more joy. When we have enough humility to see that God works through all sorts of people and gives each of us unique blessings, it will make our lives better mirrors of God's image.

Finally, the one thing I want to end with this morning is the one hidden secret, the one thing the disciples got right in the midst of failure: *keep following!* In the midst of all of these failures where the disciples just don't get it right, they keep following after Jesus. They never leave and say, "Sorry, rabbi, this is just too hard." And it is hard! But day after day, failure after failure, they keep persevering. And in the midst of all those failures, in their faithfulness to follow Jesus we see sparks of hope. In our other readings this morning, we kept hearing about godly resilience in the midst of failure. Acts 28 this morning, we heard how Paul failed to reach the Jewish leaders in Rome with the hope of Jesus Christ. Yet he stayed there for two years keeping up the work. He persevered. In Isaiah 43, God said to the Israelites, "Don't dwell on the past. You've messed up big time. But I'm doing a new thing! Forget the past and follow me!" We started this morning discussing the tragedy of John and Kate Gosselin. It is a tragedy because in the midst of their failure, they gave up. Failure is *never* final until you give up.

And that's what I want to encourage you with this morning. Take these lessons to heart; look to the disciples' story and learn from them so that you don't make the same mistakes. But if you do, remember...don't lose hope! If you believe in God and have given your life over to Him, if you have said "yes" to the gift of eternal life He freely gives through Christ Jesus, there is nothing anyone can do to take that gift of salvation away. No failure you have made in your life is too big for the Spirit to forgive. Even if you've given up in the past on a marriage or on a friend or on your finances or on your walk with God, God can find a way to redeem it. Just keep walking with Him, no matter what, and even when you fail – not if, but when you fail – you will fail well. Let's pray.