

When Failure Is an Option

Some accuse us, this generation and a couple to follow, of becoming “soft”. I think it’s true... ~ probably. 'Seems like these days many of us we want a trophy .. for participation.

But in life, failing... can help us. Failing...can help us to understand our limits ...and gain valuable knowledge about ourselves...and others. Failure...is a valuable option; we *grow* from it.

Come, let us worship God....who alone...never fails us!

.....
Scripture Reading – You will most undoubtedly recognize our scripture lesson today. It is set in Eden...before we were banished...east....of that perfect place on earth. This is Genesis, chapter 2: 15 through 17, and chapter 3, verses 1 through 7.

15 The Lord God took the man and put him in the garden of Eden to till it and keep it. 16And the Lord God commanded, ‘You may freely eat of every tree of the garden; 17but of the tree of the knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day that you eat of it you shall die.’

3 Now the serpent was more crafty than any other wild animal that the Lord God had made. He said to the woman, “Did God say, ‘You shall not eat from any tree in the garden?’” 2 The woman said to the serpent, “We may eat of the fruit of the trees in the garden; 3 but God said, ‘You shall not eat of the fruit of the tree that is in the middle of the garden, nor shall you touch it, or you shall die.’” 4 But the serpent said to the woman, “You will not die; 5... for God knows that when you eat of it your eyes will be opened, and you will be like God,[a] knowing good and evil.” 6 So when the woman saw that the tree was good for food, and that it was a delight to the eyes, and that the tree was to be desired to make one wise, she took of its fruit and ate; and she also gave some to her husband, who was with her, and he ate. 7 Then the eyes of both were opened, and they knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths for themselves.

And here ends this sobering word....detailing our fall from Grace.

Special Music -

Prayer – Pray....with me:

Mother of all Wisdom, and Father of Surprise, your thoughts are not our thoughts, nor are your ways our ways. Where we are closed, open us with this Word, that we might recognize the Christ and follow. Amen.

Sermon –

Who likes to get a ZERO on a quiz or a test? No one!

Maybe it isn't a ZERO. ..Maybe it's 25 percent, or 40. ...Failing.

But in some school districts across the country, such grades are becoming a thing of the past. No more ZEROS! There's a movement afoot in some educational systems designed to keep students from feeling the pain of a ZERO. These school districts are creating a grading scale in which failure is not an option.

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In Virginia's Fairfax County Public Schools, middle and high school students can earn a score no lower than 50. Across the Potomac River in Maryland, Prince George's County now limits failing grades to a 50 percent minimum score. All the students have to do is show a "good-faith effort."

Failure.. is not an option.

So what is this pain-free scoring all about? Some educators (*in ivory towers*) evidently believe these new grading systems are more conducive to learning. They believe getting a score of 50.. instead of ZERO encourages students to catch up when they fall behind instead of giving up. And...there's a truth in that. No one wants failures to put students on a path to dropping out.

Others argue that failing grades are important tools. They prepare students for college and the working world. If 50 percent... is our minimum score, then grades can mask ...lessons we need to learn.

In school ~ and in the work world, failure needs to be an option. Otherwise, we fail to see the truth.

Look at Eve in Eden. And Adam. *And Adam!*

God gave them a great place. Fruitful foliage. Beautiful flowers and shrubs. Exotic trees... ~ ~ *Including..* an impressive tree in the middle of the garden. And God said, "You may freely eat of every tree of this magnificent garden" -- except this one! "Of the tree of knowledge of good and evil you shall not eat, for in the day you do.... uou'll begin to die" (2:15-17).

In other words, eat the forbidden fruit, and you fail!

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Soon after this, the twin tongued serpent said to Adam's partner, "Did God tell you to not eat from every tree in the garden?" And Eve answered, quite correctly.

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Well, God said to stay away from this choice...because it could have deadly consequences.

But the serpent said, (*snort*) "You won't die. God's just jealous, because when you eat of it ..you'll be like God." (3:1-5). (and we all want...every advantage we can get; right? That's a temptation...)

The slithery serpent said: "You won't fail; you might even survive. Maybe better. You'll be like God, knowing the difference between good and evil."

Failure - - was an option for Adam and Eve. God said the penalty for eating forbidden fruit was dying a little bit. Losing our place in perfection. AND...., once the serpent said, 'there're no consequences for failure'... Well, that fruit....was just too delicious a temptation.. to resist!

Screens go dark

Studies show... people are more careful when they sense greater risk. ~ And less careful when they feel more protected. This behavior is called "risk compensation." Drivers drive faster - wearing seatbelts. They drive closer - to the vehicle in front of them when they have anti-lock brakes. In skydiving, equipment has become steadily more reliable... but the fatality rate has remained constant, since skydivers engage in *riskier* behavior.

In short, humans make better choices when failure is an option.

Genesis tells us Adam and Eve, wanting to be more godlike, tasted this tempting fruit, "Then the eyes of both were opened... They knew that they were naked; and they sewed fig leaves together and made loincloths to cover their shame.

Suddenly, ...Adam and Eve's grade... is not looking good.

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And we ...need... to look at our failures. Not be ashamed of them -- but, *learn* from them. Whether it's an Emperor who's not wearing any new clothes. Or a president. Or a pastor...who fails. These marks humble us, but they also help us understand our limits and point us in new directions.

How would we grow in faith....if we never failed? If there were no consequences.... for our wrong choices?

Screens go dark

Sometimes, the path to success involves a face-plant into a flock of failure.
~ Peter Gomes served for decades as minister of Memorial Church at Harvard. But when he was a teen, his heart was set on going to Bowdoin College. When he went to the campus for the required on-campus interview, the admissions officer said to him, "Mr. Gomes, I don't think you are Bowdoin material."

He was stunned. Scarred.. by his rejection. And He ended up attending Bates College, his second choice.

But Bates turned out to be the best place for him, and he received an excellent education. After many years in ministry, he was awarded an honorary degree from Bowdoin, ..and he thanked the college : for not offering him admission. "What had looked like a disaster and dead end," he said "turned out to be a means for improvement."

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So....what was our first parents' failure? The first of their ZEROS came from failing to trust God's word. God said 'avoid this forbidden fruit', but they ate it anyway. And eventually they were exiled...east, out of Eden. Away from the Garden....and perfection.... To a place where you and I still work, by the sweat of our brow. And fail...to do justice, and seek kindness...

They failed. And their eyes...were opened -- not only to their nakedness, but to the importance of trusting God's word. The Bible is filled with guidance designed to help us, not hurt us. In fact, we end up doing violence to ourselves when we ignore it. "Remember the sabbath. As much as you can, honor your parents. Don't murder. Don't be adulterous. Don't steal" (Exodus 20:8-15). Each of these commandments is designed to enhance our quality of life.

And we learn from Adam and Eve that our life *improves*.. when we hear...and obey God's word. When we trust...and follow it.

There's a second ZERO lurking ...here. The serpent slithered, "If you eat this....you will be like God!" And oh....who doesn't want to be godlike?

But only God is God!

We...are put on earth to live as God's children. Like Adam and Eve, we..are finite... human beings, vulnerable to failing and falling and failure.....in myriad ways.

Although this might seem like a disaster and dead end, failure actually helps us by opening our eyes to the truth ...of who we are...in Creation.

As finite human beings, we put our faith in a powerful and loving God, trusting Adonai.... to forgive..and renew us.

We *can* ..choose to avoid evil - and do good. We can turn to other people for help and support, instead of feeling as though we have to solve all our problems by ourselves.

Beloved, humans...lend me your flesh, your ear! Even in Eden, even in the garden of PERFECTION..... unlike some schools today, failure was an option.

And thank God for that. Adam and Eve failed the test.

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But their failure taught themand teaches us today - to trust God's word and live as children of God.

Amen.