

James 5:13-20 ¹³Are any among you suffering? They should pray. Are any cheerful? They should sing songs of praise. ¹⁴Are any among you sick? They should call for the elders of the church and have them pray over them, anointing them with oil in the name of the Lord. ¹⁵The prayer of faith will save the sick, and the Lord will raise them up; and anyone who has committed sins will be forgiven. ¹⁶Therefore confess your sins to one another, and pray for one another, so that you may be healed. The prayer of the righteous is powerful and effective. ¹⁷Elijah was a human being like us, and he prayed fervently that it might not rain, and for three years and six months it did not rain on the earth. ¹⁸Then he prayed again, and the heaven gave rain and the earth yielded its harvest. ¹⁹My brothers and sisters, if anyone among you wanders from the truth and is brought back by another, ²⁰you should know that whoever brings back a sinner from wandering will save the sinner's soul from death and will cover a multitude of sins.

Mark 9:14-29 ¹⁴When they came to the disciples, they saw a great crowd around them, and some scribes arguing with them. ¹⁵When the whole crowd saw him, they were immediately overcome with awe, and they ran forward to greet him. ¹⁶He asked them, "What are you arguing about with them?" ¹⁷Someone from the crowd answered him, "Teacher, I brought you my son; he has a spirit that makes him unable to speak; ¹⁸and whenever it seizes him, it dashes him down; and he foams and grinds his teeth and becomes rigid; and I asked your disciples to cast it out, but they could not do so." ¹⁹He answered them, "You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me." ²⁰And they brought the boy to him. When the spirit saw him, immediately it convulsed the boy, and he fell on the ground and rolled about, foaming at the mouth. ²¹Jesus asked the father, "How long has this been happening to him?" And he said, "From childhood. ²²It has often cast him into the fire and into the water, to destroy him; but if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us." ²³Jesus said to him, "If you are able! —All things can be done for the one who believes." ²⁴Immediately the father of the child cried out, "I believe; help my unbelief!" ²⁵When Jesus saw that a crowd came running together, he rebuked the unclean spirit, saying to it, "You spirit that keeps this boy from speaking and hearing, I command you, come out of him, and never enter him again!" ²⁶After crying out and convulsing him terribly, it came out, and the boy was like a corpse, so that most of them said, "He is dead." ²⁷But Jesus took him by the hand and lifted him up, and he was able to stand. ²⁸When he had entered the house, his disciples asked him privately, "Why could we not cast it out?" ²⁹He said to them, "This kind can come out only through prayer."

James 5:13-20 and Mark 9:14-29
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"Help My Unbelief!"
Rev. Amy Terhune

On May 31, 2002, California State University at Long Beach held its commencement exercises as it does every year around that time. Among the students in sea of graduates was a man who'd begun work on his degree some 35 years before, but had never been able to finish. He'd wanted to go to the University of Southern California School of Theater, Film and Television, but they rejected his application at least twice because he only carried a C average from his High School course work. So California State took a chance on him. But he dropped out before ever finishing his degree.

Sounds like a typical story of another young kid not too sure who he is or what he wanted to do with his life. When he finally went back 35 years later to finish the academic requirements for the degree, he petitioned the school to waive the required 12-minute short film that all senior film majors must submit. In its place, he asked if the department would accept a little film he'd worked on in the early 1990s. It was about 195 minutes and was entitled "Schindler's List". The University agreed and so Steven Spielberg finally got to put on a cap and gown and receive a BA to post on his wall. He can put it

beside his 3 Oscars, 7 Golden Globes, and 11 Emmys. [info gleaned and condensed from Wikipedia and the IMDB database.]

That reminds me of a story about another Hollywood personality. Framed and hanging near his desk was the response letter he got from MGM after his first ever screen test. It noted that he, “Can’t act, can’t sing, is slightly bald, but can dance a little.” Fred Astaire displayed it to remind himself of what he’d overcome and to keep from ever losing hope. I like that.

But I think my favorite story comes from the sports world. In 1993, Reggie Jackson was inducted into the Baseball hall of fame. He’d played 21 seasons, been a part of 5 winning world series teams, won MVP awards, was named to the All-Star team 14 times, hit 563 career home runs, having hit more than 100 home runs for three different ball clubs, and had a batting average around .285. Those are impressive statistics, but all sorts of players have better stats. In fact, Reggie Jackson only holds one record—he struck out 2,597 times—the most in Major League Baseball history at the time.

I tell these stories because they challenge us to rethink our basic assumptions. What is success? A college degree? A job? A record? What is failure? Dropping out? A rejection letter? Striking out at the plate? The most successful people in life have a string of failures behind them.

But I’ll admit: that’s rough. I don’t like failure. I am a typical type-A personality. I don’t like to mess around with stuff. I like to be prepared. I like to be collected and cool and calm. But sometimes I’m not. It doesn’t always work that way. One of my most profound memories from seminary is of failure. I had to design a 4-week class for my intern site. I was interning at a church in Watertown, Massachusetts at the time, and I asked the Bible Study I led there if they’d let me design and teach this class for my assignment. But I had to teach the first class to my fellow seminarians over at Boston University for a grade. It did not go well. Unlike the Bible Study at the church I was serving, my class had little history together. My questions fell flat, and went in an entirely unexpected direction, rendering my lesson plans useless. Within 15 minutes, I had to admit to the class and the professor that I was not prepared for the direction in which we’d gone, and I had no idea how to proceed. I failed the assignment. I held my composure until the end of class, but cried my way through most of campus worship which followed. Later, my Bible Study in Watertown asked me about the project. I admitted my failure, and the grief and shame that followed. They wanted me to do the class for them anyway, and the pastor there in Watertown, who was my clergy mentor, said he thought that might be a good idea – a chance to learn and grow in a less-pressured environment. So I did...reluctantly. Interestingly, the same questions that had fallen flat and led unexpected places among my colleagues at Seminary, produced invigorating discussion among my Bible Study and went more or less exactly where I expected it to go. Reflecting on that experience, my mentor challenged my assumptions about success and failure, and helped me find some perspective when he noted that I obviously knew my own people better than I thought I did.

If we look at our scripture lesson this morning, failure is the theme of the day. Nobody likes to fail, and yet, you and I know all about failure, don’t we? If you’re anything like me, and I suspect we’re more alike than not, than you’ve wrestled with feelings of inadequacy just like I have. Maybe you wrestle with it every day, every week. Those of you who don’t, more power to you, but most of us have those feelings of not measuring up in some way; those doubts that plague us. As this morning’s scripture lesson shows us, faith in Christ does not immunize one against failure. The question we must ask ourselves, then, is what do we do with our failures? How should we handle them? How do we deal with risking failure?

Our lesson for today has some important lessons to teach, but it is a complicated text and we need to take a hard look at it. Jesus has been up the mountain with Peter, James, and John. He is transfigured before them, and they see Jesus in all his glory, speaking with Moses and Elijah. It’s an incredible, holy, profound, meaningful moment. Peter and James and John hardly know what to do with the moment, how to take it in and process it. “Let’s build a Retreat Center, Lord” says Peter. As if they could just stay there in the moment indefinitely. Jesus responds, “we’re going downhill...literally.”

“Halford Luccock in *The Interpreter's Bible* comments on the phrase “going downhill.” It is usually applied to people in a condemnatory or pitying manner, as a way of speaking about failure. When we say of anybody, he (or she) is “going downhill” we mean that that person has seen better days. But, says Luccock, “there is a nobler sense of the words as well – the sense in which Jesus spent his whole life going downhill from the high and lonely places, where he held communion with God to the level, crowded places of human need. There are those who spend much of their time on the fine art of ‘going uphill,’ climbing to some height of advantage, position, power, or wealth, and pay no attention at all to this much finer art, the art of going downhill. Success just might be the lifelong descent from the place of vision to the place of deed, from the hill of privilege to the plain of need.” [adapted from Halford E. Luccock, *The Interpreter's Bible*, Vol. 7 (New York and Nashville: Abingdon-Cokesbury Press, 1951) pg. 779; as used in “Dealing with Our Doubts” by Donald B. Strobe, www.Sermons.com.] Peter utterly misses that.

But he's not the only one who fails to comprehend the message of Christ. When Jesus comes down the mountain, an argument is in process, suggesting that the other 9 disciples aren't doing any better than Peter, James, and John. A father and his suffering child stand on the sidelines while the disciples and the scribes duke it out. Jesus appears and demands to know what is going on. That's when the father of the child speaks up. “I brought my son and asked your disciples to cast out the evil spirit, but they couldn't do it.” To which, Jesus responds, clearly annoyed, “You faithless generation, how much longer must I be among you? How much longer must I put up with you? Bring him to me.” Now it would seem, at first glance, that Jesus is angry because his disciples couldn't cast out the demon. But put yourself in the scene and consider this: if you had been Jesus just come down the mountain and you found two opposing religious factions arguing theology and semantics while the suffering sat—still suffering—on the sidelines, wouldn't you be pretty annoyed as well? The problem isn't that they couldn't do it. The problem is that *when* they couldn't do it, the scribes took it as an opportunity to discredit Jesus and the disciples took the bait. Instead of ignoring them and joining hands in prayer, they got defensive and argumentative trying to save face.

If the question we are asking ourselves is ‘What do we do with our failures? How should we handle them?’ then I would suggest that we start by admitting them. The crowd was guilty of assuming that Jesus' powers were as limited as those of his disciples. The disciples would not admit their failures. The problem was that in refusing to admit their own weaknesses, they had no instrument to talk about Jesus' power. They couldn't address the crowd's misconceptions. The father, on the other hand, admits his weaknesses. He cries out “I believe; help my unbelief!” That statement touches me every time. Because that's so often where I am—where many of us are, truth be told. We believe in our hearts. We pray. We worship. We try to live well. But the challenges never let up, do they? We get distracted and bogged down and wound up. And so we walk this tightrope between hungering to believe on one hand and wrestling with it all on the other. Cries the father, “I believe, Lord, help my unbelief!” And in his admission, the power of Jesus is given freedom to heal most profoundly.

What do we do with our failures? How should we handle them? First, we admit them. Second, we would do well to follow Jesus' instructions here. “Bring him to me,” Jesus says. The disciples failed to heal this boy of an evil spirit. But when the boy came face to face with Jesus, he found healing. Jesus still tells us, ‘Bring it to me. I'll deal with it. When you botch things up, bring it to me.’ When the disciples ask later why they couldn't get rid of the demon, Jesus tells them, ‘this kind can only come out through prayer.’ They didn't bring it to God.

I said earlier that this is a complicated text and we need to take a hard look at it. As the story progresses, the father pleads with Jesus, “if you are able to do anything, have pity on us and help us.” And Jesus answers him, “If you are able!—All things can be done for the one who believes.” This would seem to suggest that if we bring it to him—bring our failures, our problems, our concerns, our suffering to Jesus, he'll be able to fix it. And yet, experience has shown us that not everyone who suffers finds relief from the pain. Not everyone who fails at something finds success at it later. Not everyone who has

problems will find that they just go away in a puff of smoke if we pray hard enough, believe hard enough. This text has been used inadvertently by more Christians to turn people off from the faith. There is a misconception out there that if, for example, we pray for our loved one to be cured of cancer and they aren't, that we didn't believe hard enough or pray hard enough, and so God didn't answer the prayer. But I ask you: what kind of God is that? A big jerk! Friends, here's a little piece of wisdom that is simple and profound all at once: "Prayer is only unanswered if we have dictated to God the answer in advance. Let me say that again: Prayer is only unanswered if the answer is dictated in advance. We are like children who have a definite idea of what present they are going to get for Christmas. They cannot appreciate the other presents until the desired item has made its appearance." [from "The Gospel of Mark" by PHEME PERKINS, *New Interpreter's Bible*, vol. VIII, L.E. Keck et al, ed. (Nashville, TN: Abingdon Press, 1995) pg. 635.] Bring it to me, Jesus tells us. Bring the problem, bring the failure, bring the guilt. And let me deal with it.

What do we do with our failures? How should we handle them? We admit them. We bring them to Jesus. And we let Jesus raise us up.

This past week, I've been working on paperwork for Charge Conference, and I've been looking at statistics for this congregation. It reflects a national trend, and it's not entirely pretty. We have our work cut out for us. I have my work cut out for me as I attempt to lead here. We'll start a contemporary service in November. It could fail. Despite all the planning, all the advertising, all the work we're pouring into this, it could fail. I lay awake at night sometimes wondering if I have what it takes to do this. But I remind myself that when it comes to ministry, it is desperation for survival that can actually kill us in the end. Surviving isn't ministry. In order to thrive, in order to be relevant, in order to grow in faith and possibility, we must risk failure. We have to do the hard work, yes, but not fearfully, and not gritting our teeth to just get through it. We do it hopefully. We do it in spite of fear. We do it trusting Christ will raise up something, even if we fail. We chance the downhill slope, remembering that Jesus went downhill in order to live love and heal suffering.

Renown preacher Maxie Dunnam, who, for a long time, was president of Asbury Theological School, is someone with whom I rarely see eye to eye on social issues confronting society today. But when it comes to theological issues, I appreciate his insight more often than not. He's a good man and a good scholar, even if we don't always agree on things, and he offers this piece of wisdom when he writes: "Note a universal truth. To approach anything in the spirit of hopelessness is to make it hopeless. To approach anything in the spirit of faith is to make it a possibility. The tension within us is the sense of the possible struggling with the curse of the impossible." [from "The Curse of the Impossible" by Maxie Dunnam, www.Sermons.com.] Or to put it another way: sometimes our greatest failure is simply the failure to hope; a failure to try.

When everyone else says, "that's it, we're dead, they're dead, the dream's dead, Jesus takes us by the hand and lifts us up, and we stand. In the end, failure isn't about what we do or don't do, but about the perspective we choose to take in life. And it is a choice. Jesus says sometimes we're going to fail. We need to fail. It's okay to fail. He also says, face it, admit it, learn from it, then bring it to me, and let me raise it up from ashes. God has the ability to shine through our weaknesses, our failures, our missed opportunities and broken dreams and soiled efforts to raise up extraordinary new realities. I believe! Help my unbelief! This is what it means to be the family of faith, the body of Christ, people of the resurrection. Thanks be to God. Amen.