

“Failure and Success”

Isaiah 42:1-7; Acts 10:34-43

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

September 3, 2017 – 13th Sunday after Pentecost – Rev. Ronald Botts

Back a number of years ago an airliner crashed into the icy Potomac River in Washington, D.C. The date was January 13, 1982. Seventy-nine people were aboard the aircraft when it went down and, of that number, only five survived. Each of those five persons had something in common. That link is what accounts for their being alive. Each of those survivors owes a great debt, an unrepayable debt, to a person who is only known today as the "sixth man."

Helicopter rescue workers reported that this man repeatedly gave away his lifeline to the other-five people who were in bitterly cold water around him. One by one they were taken away to safety but, by the time the copter returned for the sixth man, he was gone. He became a grim statistic of the crash, along with 73 others who also shared that flight. We will never know which one of the victims he was.

In an later interview the helicopter pilot reflected on this brave and good man. "Imagine he had just survived that horrible place crash. The river was ice-cold and each minute brought him closer to death. He could have gone on the first trip but he put everyone else ahead of himself."

As we hear this story we can't help but conclude that this man was a hero. Much of our admiration comes from the fact that he responded unselfishly to the moment. He was presented with an opportunity to do something truly important and he did not fail.

A few minutes before he was seated comfortably on the plane. His thoughts may well have been on his arrival and the family and friends who awaited him. Perhaps he was returning home from a business trip or from a visit to someone he hadn't seen in a long time. The plane was beginning a long, smooth descent into National Airport.

Then, in a flash, jerking, flickering lights, the tremendous impact, the icy water, and the terrible realization of what had happened. Moments later he would be confronted with the biggest decision of his life—to think solely of himself, or to consider those in the water around him more injured than he.

A moment of decision was laid out before him in the time of a tragic accident. A helicopter hovered overhead. The rescue chair was lowered toward him. There wasn't time to weigh all the options before him class, only a few seconds to act. Nobody else could help him with what he should do; he was all on his own.

So he grabbed for the chair and then redirected it toward another of the survivors. What he did once, he repeated four more times. What he decided first, he stuck with until the end. If he had second thoughts, they were never apparent. He assisted others to safety, even though he had to know the added danger this caused for him. He had five opportunities for sure survival; five chances came and five chances went, but he stayed in the water while five strangers were taken up and away from this terrible scene. Now, finally, it was his turn.

On the helicopter's next return, the sixth man would get in the rescue seat himself and be pulled to safety. We'll never know what private agony he went through as he came to realize that he could not hold out any longer. The cold water and his own fatigue were about to overtake him. Whatever his final thoughts, his fears and his regrets, there just may also have been a fleeting moment of peacefulness. Perhaps he left life with a sense of having done the right thing, whatever the personal cost, and felt a moment of serenity reserved only for those who hadn't sought after it. The "sixth" passenger was tested to his limit, and he succeeded. He did not fail.

In this incident one is reminded of Albert Camus' story of a man in Paris who stood by watching as a young woman drowned in the Seine. He was haunted and tormented all his life by his failure to act. These memories were so vivid within him that it brought him to the brink of suicide. One night he found himself standing again on that bridge where he had been years before. In the story he cries out, "Oh, young woman, throw yourself into the river once again that I might save the both of us."

Of all the fears that plague us, failure is one of the greatest. We like to be good at the things we do. We take a natural pride in our accomplishments. How it would hurt then, at the end, to feel that we had been a failure in the greatest test of all, that of life itself.

Fear of failure gnaws at us and eats away at our insides. While it might not be visible to others, it surely is to us. We live with it, and though the fears may dissipate at times, they always recur. Many seek to flee such thoughts through drink or drugs or escapist behavior. Others try to overcome it through seeking material possessions or attaining popularity or gaining power.

We want our lives to count for something. At the end we want to feel that we have contributed to some good for the world and that, when we are gone, it will have made a difference to those who survive us. Wouldn't it be great if we could have the assurance that we weren't going to fail, that everything is guaranteed to come out all right in the end?

Yet, the fear of failure is real and a powerful force upon us. It nags us and drives us and may even threaten to push us over the edge.

How then might our faith speak to this fear? What insights, if any, can we find to make this fear shrink back into the manageability? We might first consider our Old Testament lesson for today: "Here is my servant, my chosen, the one in whom my soul delights. I have put my spirit upon him; he will bring forth justice to all. No matter what obstacles that life presents, he will not grow faint, he will not fail, until he has established justice on earth."

Christians have traditionally seen in this passage from Isaiah a prophesy of the Messiah, who was indeed God's chosen. We can look back now upon his life and say with certainty, "He did not fail." His potential was fulfilled; he did all that could have been expected of him. Through him justice was advanced and he became a light to all the nations. The prophet here looks forward to the future and to what is about to come.

Our other text from Acts has the opposite perspective. It looks back from after the resurrection and witnesses to the fact of who Jesus was and what his life has meant: "God anointed Jesus of Nazareth with the Holy Spirit and with power, and he went about doing

good and healing all who were oppressed. We are witnesses to all that he did both in Judea and Jerusalem. They put him to death by hanging him on a tree, but God raised him on the third day. and he commanded us to preach to the people and to testify that he is the one ordained by God.”

Someone might say, "That's Jesus, but what about us?" How does it fit our situation? Do those two passages, which frame the life and ministry of Jesus, have any bearing on life as we know it? I think they do, though it may not be apparent at first.

You know, human life is not necessarily measured in merit badges, civic plaques, diplomas, most valuable player awards, credit ratings, or any of the like. It doesn't matter if your name is listed in *Who's Who*. It has nothing to do with how many cars you have in the garage. In fact, most of the things the world tells us to strive for are of little ultimate importance. At the end we may realize these goals are really a deception.

At some level we understand that to be the case, but most often we continue to live as if these are the crucial things. These common benchmarks continue to be the determinants of whether our life is successful. If they are the true measurements, then I think most of us are in trouble. As I look around I don't see many in this room who successful by these standards. I don't see any millionaires. I haven't read many of your names in the newspaper recently, or seen you on tv, or heard the President lift up your name in praise.

The victorious life, something we should strive for, is something different. It is attained through the inner attributes of integrity, courage, love, gratitude, peacefulness, and good will. Nor does a successful life come down to a single act; rather it is a composite of everything that has gone before.

That unknown "sixth" passenger in the plane crash didn't suddenly get brave; he was brave long before the moment of impact. His instinctive act that day revealed him to be a person of innate courage who affirmed the worth and value found in others. He did not fail when the ultimate test arrived because he had not been failing all along. Everything he invested in life to that point he had to draw from in order to do what he did in those hectic minutes. When his decisive moment arrived his response potential was already in place or he could have never acted in so unselfish a way. This surely wasn't a reversal of character, but a revealing of character.

At a symposium on success and failure held recently at MIT, one of the most significant ideas that surfaced was really very evident. The assertion was this: "It is very rare to have significant success without failure first." Yet we so often find ourselves becoming stuck on the things we do wrong and lose confidence in our eventual ability to do them right.

Consider others. Babe Ruth was the home run king, but he was also the strikeout king, too, leading the league in both. Thomas Edison patented more than a thousand inventions, but he failed in his attempts far more often than he ever succeeded. JK Rowling, of Harry Potter fame, was also turned down in her early submissions and even given the suggestion that she take a writing course. She didn't give up, though, and slogged through to see her novels reach 400,000,000 copies worldwide.

In Jesus we see a person who lived a life totally faithful to his calling, and that is really what we're all called to do. We don't have to be Christ, nor do we have to be our mother or father, or anyone else we hold in high esteem. In fact, to be exactly like them, no matter how virtuous they might be, would surely be to fail in the final analysis. Our calling is to be fully **ourselves** and to live the best life of which we are capable.

The trouble is that we keep comparing ourselves with others, and it's always the truly outstanding we use for comparison. We are not someone else, and they are not us. We have to be true to who we are, with all our strengths and weaknesses. Often we consider our lack of perfection and are too quick to give up and regard ourselves as failures. I had a neighbor once who didn't have a very high opinion of herself, and that was very unfortunate. Nobody in the world could make better strawberry-rhubarb pie than Marie, and that wasn't her only attribute. But she couldn't see this.

If you take nothing else from our time together this morning, perhaps it should be this: It is God who has created us and who loves us for the good that is born within. Our job in life is to become that person God knows us to be and that, at times, we get a glimpse of as well. That is a fulfilled life, a victorious life, and the only kind of life which really counts in the long run.

The "sixth" man may not have a name, but he leaves a legacy of five lives saved and an example of courage and self-sacrifice for all of us.