



Today our nation celebrates Independence Day, which commemorates the day that the 13 original colonies joined together to declare their independence from Great Britain. In fact, the first time we were ever referred to as the “**United States** of America” was in the Declaration of Independence, which was accepted by the leadership of the 13 colonies on July 4, 1776. July 3, we were a collection of colonies. July 4, we were the United States of America. That’s why we call July 4 the birthday of our nation. So, I hope you take some time to recognize and give God thanks for the blessings we enjoy as a nation. (1)

Of course, no holiday would be as much fun without a blooper somewhere along the way. Like the little fellow who was asked to recite the Pledge of Allegiance, and he got all flustered and he blurted out, “I pledge allegiance to the flag of the United States of America and to the republic for which it stands, **one naked individual** with liberty and justice for all.” Well, “one naked individual” may be too much liberty for some of us, but I’m sure that this young fellow’s heart was in his recitation even if his tongue let him down.

I hope you take some time today to consider what virtues make our nation strong, and what obstacles make us weak, and what part each of us can play in building a nation that will last another 245 years.

Of course, there are some well-meaning people who believe that pointing out any weakness in our republic is unpatriotic. They are like the business owner who would not allow his wife or any of his employees to point out any of his shortcomings. And so, he went to a formal company banquet where he was asked to say a few words. There he stood before a large group of his employees and their spouses for 30 minutes with a large piece of lettuce stuck firmly between his two front teeth. Everyone saw it, but none of them had the courage to draw it to his attention. Sometimes the person who points out our weaknesses to us is our most valuable friend.

Today’s lesson from II Corinthians is about weaknesses, personal weaknesses. We all have them. It doesn’t matter what image we present to the world. It doesn’t matter how much money we have in our bank account. It doesn’t matter what degree or title we have at work. We all have weaknesses. The problem is that we live in a prosperous, image-driven society. Nobody puts their weaknesses on Instagram or Snapchat. We only put our best, most airbrushed image out there. The last thing we want our friends to see is our flaws.

Some of our weaknesses are physical, some are mental, some are moral. Some of those weaknesses have to do with our work, some with our family life, some with our relationship with Christ. Some of us, for example, have short tempers, others of us struggle with depression or anxiety. Some of us are too proud, others of us lack back-bone—we give in too quickly. But all of us are weak in some area of our life.

Saint Paul had his weaknesses. One in particular caused him much heartache. We don’t know for certain what it was. He called it his “thorn in the flesh.” Some have suggested that St. Paul suffered from epileptic seizures. If so, he was in good company. Two of the most

powerful men who ever lived—Julius Caesar and Napoleon—were epileptics, as have been many other great individuals through history. In St. Paul's day there was no Dilantin or Keppra to control seizures. If that was his thorn, he was stuck with it.

St. Paul prayed that God would deliver him from his affliction. Three times he beseeched God about this matter, but God's answer to him was, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." Notice those final words: "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness." In other words, God seemed to be saying to Paul, "Trust me, Paul. I will take care of you. And I can use your weakness to demonstrate my power."

We can learn from Paul's experience. Paul not only learned to accept his thorn in the flesh, he even began to boast about his weakness in order to show the power of Christ. There's a wonderful lesson there. Our weakness, whatever it may be, can become our strength if we will commit it to God.

Our weakness can become a strength, first of all, if it causes us to grow. When we can grow beyond fear, beyond self-centeredness, beyond immaturity—then we can reflect God's glory. God's glory may shimmer in our strengths, but it shines in our weaknesses. When others see us grow in patience, wisdom, courage and faith through our heartaches, that's when God's glory shines a convicting light into the hearts and minds of others around us. That's what causes them to say, "I see God in you. I want what you have."

Some of you will remember the tennis superstar Arthur Ashe. A much-respected man, Ashe—while still at the height of his career—contracted AIDS from a blood transfusion during heart surgery. Fellow athletes admired Arthur Ashe for his skill and class on the court. But the world came to admire him even more for his courage in facing this tragic illness which led to his untimely death.

In an interview, Ashe commented, "If I asked, 'Why me?' about my troubles, I would have to ask, 'Why me?' about my blessings. Why my winning Wimbledon? Why my marrying a beautiful, gifted woman and having a wonderful child?"

What an incredible perspective! "If I asked, 'Why me?' about my troubles, I would have to ask, 'Why me?' about my blessings." Arthur Ashe understood that God uses both our joys and our sorrows to grow us into people that reflect His glory, His character, His priorities. As someone has said, our disappointments are "His appointments." By God's grace painful experiences or situations can help us grow.

It is only human to pray for God to fix our troubles. The Apostle Paul had done that more than once. "Three times I pleaded with the Lord to take it away from me." (vs. 8) Pleading. Begging. What do you do when God doesn't fix your most grievous problem? That's the time when you pray for God to reveal Himself in your troubles. "But he said to me, 'My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness.'" (vs. 9) When we give up on our own strength and rely totally on God to help us endure our troubles, that's the point when we discover the true nature of God's character and the true faithfulness of God's promises.

Have you reached a point in your life where you are pleading with God to change you or to change your circumstances? Does it seem like God is silent in your struggles? Then instead of asking God to fix your circumstances, ask God to reveal Himself in your circumstances. Admit that the only way you will get through this is with God's strength. And look for opportunities to grow in courage and compassion and wisdom. Our weaknesses can become strengths if they help us grow.

They can also become strengths if they make us more determined to give our best in all circumstances. Remember, your life is not just about you. If you believe in God as your Creator, then you know that God made you for a greater purpose than your own happiness and comfort. When people look at you, at your character and your choices and your priorities and your actions, they should see the power and truth and love and wisdom of God. Other people should feel some impact from your life. They should be inspired or comforted or challenged or changed because of their contact with you. So how you choose to respond to your weakness matters.

Bethany Noel Murray is an artist from Boston, Massachusetts. Her paintings look like fantasies of magical forests filled with light and colors and strange shapes. Fans of her work describe it as like looking at a beautiful landscape through a kaleidoscope.

The secret to Murray's unique and beautiful paintings lies in the pain that she suffers. Bethany Noel Murray has suffered from chronic migraines for over 20 years. In addition to the intense pain of the headaches, she also experiences sensitivity to light and sound, and distortions in her vision during a migraine. Rather than give up her art and hide in bed, Murray turns her pain into beauty. As she says, "My paintings have been proof to myself of what I experience during an attack, and despite the pain, I've made the choice to see the good, weird, and beautiful." (2)

God may shimmer in our strengths, but He shines in our weakness—if we let our weakness lead us to grow and if it causes us to give our best effort in all circumstances.

Our weakness can also become a strength if it helps us change our life's course. Sometimes what seems a weakness is only a signal that we are pursuing the wrong trail.

One of the most revealing lines in literature appears in the opening paragraph of A. A. Milne's WINNIE-THE-POOH. Milne writes: "Here is Edward Bear coming downstairs now, bump, bump, bump, on the back of his head, behind Christopher Robin. It is, as far as he knows, the only way of coming downstairs, but sometimes he feels that there really is another way . . . if only he could stop bumping for a moment and think of it!"

If you keep bumping your head coming down the stairs, maybe it is time you stop for a moment and think if there is another way it might be done. Sometimes our so-called weaknesses are simply warning signs to us that we are on the wrong road.

Since this is the day we celebrate our Independence, I thought I might tell a story about one of the best-known figures in the battle for Independence. He was a man who needed to begin again. His name was Patrick Henry.

Even though Patrick Henry has been revered for most of our history as a patriot and an orator, for years of his life, Patrick Henry was a miserable failure. He and his brother opened a store, but it failed. Next Patrick's father-in-law set him up in farming. Patrick was given 300 acres, a house, and 6 slaves. That is interesting, don't you think? Patrick Henry was a slave owner. He is best known for his "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death" speech, but somehow, he did not think that the men and women who worked his farm might have the same sentiments. Some of our ancestors had this same blind spot—and we are still paying for their sins today.

In spite of his father-in-law's generosity, however, Patrick Henry also failed as a farmer. Finally, on the advice of some friends, Patrick turned to law. He was a natural persuader and a captivating orator. As a lawyer, Patrick was an instant success. Further, his was exactly the voice that was needed to launch the colonies toward a break with England. "Give Me Liberty or Give Me Death." It was the perfect sentiment for the time. Though he shared a glaring and regrettable weakness with many of our ancestors, Patrick Henry was not a failure. He was simply in the wrong field for much of his life. (3)

Finally, and most important of all, our weaknesses may become strengths if they remind us of our dependence on God. I can just hear St. Paul boasting, can't you? "Look at me," he would say, "I once persecuted the church. Look at me, a man who has to battle this humiliating affliction—this thorn in the flesh. Yet Christ has used me to plant churches all over the known world." Paul was a man of tremendous intellect. He was also a man of unquestionable persuasive powers. Perhaps if it had not been for his thorn in the flesh, he would have leaned upon his own ability rather than the power of God working through him. And you and I would never have heard the name of Paul. His weakness became his strength. His scar became a star. His hurt became a halo. And the same thing can happen to us—if our weakness helps us to grow, if our weakness makes us more determined to succeed, if our weakness causes us to try new things, and if our weakness causes us to rely on God.

Let me tell you about a young woman whose life shone through her weakness. Kristen Fersovitch was a Canadian singer and songwriter who was known for her faith in God and her infectious joy. In June 2011, Kristen was diagnosed with cancer—for the second time. She was just 27 years old. This time, the doctors said it was inoperable. Kristen admits that she cried and prayed and pleaded. But she also made up her mind to face every day with joy. Everyone who met her was inspired by the joy they saw in her.

One day during her prayer time, Kristen said to God, ". . . I don't understand, but I trust You. Your ways and thoughts are higher than mine. Just speak to me, Father. Bring me comfort." And then she flipped her Bible open, and there on the page she read these words from Isaiah 55: "'For my thoughts are not your thoughts, neither are your ways my ways,' declares the LORD. 'As the heavens are higher than the earth, so are my ways higher than your ways and my thoughts than your thoughts. You will go out in joy and be led forth in peace.'" (Isaiah 55:8-9, 12a)

In October 2013, at just 30 years of age, Kristen Fersovitch went to be with God. In her last conversation with her husband, Mike, before she died, Kristen whispered a song of praise

to him. It took all her strength to whisper those words to her husband. But it was a song of joy. Kristen Fersovitch knew that God's grace was sufficient for her and that God's power is made perfect in weakness. That's how she could face her own weakness with joy. (4)

God has the power, authority and mercy to answer our every prayer and take away our every weakness. He could make our life as smooth and comfy as a velvet blanket. Why doesn't He? Because our life is meant to be a reflection of God's love and power. And God's power is made perfect in weakness. May we have the faith to say with the apostle Paul, "Therefore I will boast all the more gladly about my weaknesses, so that Christ's power may rest on me. That is why, for Christ's sake, I delight in weaknesses, in insults, in hardships, in persecutions, in difficulties. For when I am weak, then I am strong."

1. *Our Daily Bread*, date unknown.

2. "Artist With Migraines Creates Kaleidoscopic Paintings to Show How She Sees the World" by Margherita Cole on February 2, 2020, My Modern Met, https://mymodernmet.com/bethany-noel-murray-migraines-in-nature/?utm_source=join1440&utm_medium=email&utm_placement=etcetera.

3. Jones, V.C. "Patrick Henry: A Personality Profile," *American History Illustrated*, (January, 1969), pp. 12-24.

4. "An Infectious Joy: The resilient life of Kristen Fersovitch" by Robert Jones. Rev. Robert W. Jones is the senior pastor of North Pointe Community Church in Edmonton, Alberta. He blogs at <http://blog.northpointechurch.ca>. <https://testimony.paoc.org/articles/an-infectious-joy>. Kristen Fersovitch's music, Songs From Home, which can be downloaded from iTunes. Her story, *Ornament: The Faith, Joy and Hope of Kristen Fersovitch*, is also available as an ebook from amazon.ca.

ChristianGlobe Networks, Inc., [Dynamic Preaching Third Quarter Sermons](#), by King Duncan

II

Almost every culture has, in its foundational mythology, a Phoenix or firebird.

The one with which we westerners are most familiar is the Greek Phoenix which, like all such mythological creatures, is said to die in a burst of sparks and fire only to be born anew from its own ashes.

Because this mythological creature lives in a constant cycle of birth, death, and rebirth, the Phoenix is, in most cultures, a symbol of renewal. While early Christians rejected any literal interpretation of the Phoenix myth, they did adopt the mythic bird as a symbol for Jesus Christ, Easter, and resurrection.

It is believed that Pope Clement I adopted it as his official symbol.

Today it remains an appropriate symbol for any Christian who has had to face the reality of failure and the struggle to rise from the ashes of unrealized hopes and dreams only to begin again with renewed faith and vigor.

The Modern Phoenix

Phoenix stories abound in our culture:

Colonel Sanders, the founder of KFC, started his dream at 65 years old after receiving a social security check for only \$105. Realizing that he couldn't live on that, he decided he had to come up with a plan for making money in his old age. The only marketable skill he had was frying chicken and he thought restaurant owners would love his secret recipe and use it. Their sales would increase, and he'd get a percentage of their profits. He drove around the country knocking on doors, sleeping in his car, wearing his white suit, and his idea was rejected 1,009 times before someone finally decided to try it.

Theodor "Dr. Seuss" Giesel's first book, *To Think That I Saw it on Mulberry Street* was rejected by 27 different publishers before he finally sold it.

John Grisham's first book, *A Time to Kill*, took three years to write and was rejected 28 times until he got one yes for a 5,000 copy trial run printing. Today he's sold over 250 million total copies of his books, world wide.

Steven Spielberg applied and twice was denied admission both times to the prestigious University of Southern California film school. Instead he went to Cal State University in Long Beach from which he went on to direct some of the biggest movie blockbusters in history. Now he's worth \$2.7 billion and in 1994 got an honorary degree from the film school that rejected him twice.

Stephen King's first book *Carrie* was rejected thirty times

Michael Jordan was cut from his high school basketball team. He turned out to be the greatest basketball player of his generation, maybe of any generation but his most famous speech begins with these words: "I have missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I have

lost almost 300 games. On 26 occasions I have been entrusted to take the game winning shot, and I missed. I have failed over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed.”

We often make the mistake of thinking that people who are successful don't fail. The truth is that they fail, often, and they let their failures inform them but they do not let their failures define them.

Jesus as Phoenix

In this morning's gospel text, Jesus experiences failure and then offered advice to his disciples about how they should handle it when they find themselves and their message rejected.

Jesus, we are told, went to his home town of Nazareth and taught in the synagogue but these were his old neighbors and his family. They knew him when he was a snotty nosed little kid, when he had scabs on his knees, teased his little sisters, and was bossy to his little brothers. His father was the carpenter who fixed their roof and rehung their door when it came off the hinges.

They knew him and he's no big deal to them.

Sociologist Tex Sample told a story not unlike this about a softball team he played on when he was in college and working in a factory to pay his way through school. He played on the factory's team in a beer league that played in the local park in the evenings.

There was, on the team, one guy who had never caught a fly ball in his life. He was fat, uncoordinated, and not very bright. If all that wasn't bad enough, he was also kind of loud and obnoxious. No one on the team liked him very much but they had to field ten guys to have a team in the league and he was the tenth.

So on this particular night they stuck him over in right field where no ball ever went and about half way through the game, a left hander came up to bat and hit a low arching fly ball right into right field. As luck would have it, it hit right into the glove of our anti-hero. He didn't even have to move his glove. The ball just fell right into it as though pulled there by a magnet. Three outs and the good guys were up to bat.

Next inning, Tex was pitching and he and the catcher were talking, mapping out some strategy or something, and this guy was out in right field, yelling at the top of his lungs, “Hey, hit it to me. Hit it to me and I'll get ya out.”

The catcher looked at Tex, shook his head, spit and said, “Listen to that idiot? He catches one ball in a whole dang season and he thinks he's somethin'. Thinks he's better'n the rest of us. That fool ain't no different from any of us. He ain't nothin'.”

Tex says that was a lesson that always stuck with him. If you wanted to get along with these guys you had to keep your mouth shut and admit that you were, just like them, nothing.

That's what Jesus was confronting. He was nothing special to these people. He had nothing to say that they want to hear. They've known him too long and too well. To them, he ain't nothin'.

And because they aren't receptive, he was unable to help them. Do you hear that? He can't help them. I always thought Jesus could do anything but, apparently, he can't. He can't un-ring a bell. He can't change the past. And he can't help those who won't be helped.

Mark tells us, he is amazed at this situation. Why won't they listen to him, accept him, learn from him? He just didn't get it. But he did accept it. He did what he could — healed a couple of people — and moved on.

And when he was giving advice to his disciples about how they should go about doing ministry, he remembered this lesson and advised them accordingly:

First, travel lightly. Don't burden yourself with extra provisions trying to cover any possible eventuality. And this applies not just to your physical provisions but to your mental/emotional ones as well. Take your faith with you but don't feel like you have to pack every answer to every question in your mental suitcase. Give yourself the freedom to trust in the Lord a little bit.

Second, be a good guest. If someone invites you to stay with them, accept gracefully and stay with them. Don't be moving around trying to get a better deal, a softer bed, a bigger honorarium.

And third, if you go somewhere and they reject you or refuse to listen to you, leave. This business about shaking the dust off your shoes was an old Jewish ritual that people in those days practiced. If they went outside Israel, when they returned and crossed the border, they would turn and shake the dust off their shoes which symbolized that they were now cutting their ties with those who were not of their faith.

Jesus suggested that this was an appropriate ritual — literally or figuratively — for anyone whose ministry is rejected.

If you're a doctor and you tell your patient to stop smoking and he doesn't...

If you're a teacher and you tell your students to do their homework, and they don't...

If you're a dentist and you tell your patients to brush and floss, and they don't...

If you're a dietitian and you give your client a diet plan but she doesn't follow it...

Well, there's only so much responsibility you can take for other people, right? Kick the dust off your shoes and move on.

Tools for the Road

But it's not always that easy, is it?

We feel responsible.

It's hard to just cut your ties and move on – so God has given us four things to help us let go of failure. Actually, probably more than four, but four will do for today.

One, is grace.

We are not saved by our success rate. We are not saved by our ability to meet our goals. We are not saved by our accomplishments or our achievements.

We are saved by God's grace, God's unconditional love for us, and that is all.

If we fail, we need not worry that our value as a human being is somehow going to be lessened, that God is going to love us less, that Jesus is going to reject us at the pearly gates. Our failures do not count against us. They are, as soon as we let loose of them, part of the past that has been relegated to the dustbin of history.

We can let go of our failures because we are not saved by our success.

Two, is our capacity to learn.

We can learn from our failures.

Think of each failure as a can full of some delightful beverage that we shall call "meaning." You fail at something and there you stand with this can in your hand and you just can't bring yourself to throw it away, let it go. So what you need to do is pour the contents of that can out into another vessel- – call that vessel "memory" — and then throw the can away.

Keep the contents long enough for it to nourish you and refresh you with meaning but that is all.

Learn all you can from that failure, *then let it go.*

We can let go of our failures because we have learned from them, we have let them inform but not determine our future choices.

Three, is our capacity for story.

Each failure is a story to tell — with humor, with grace, with wit, with fun — so others can learn from it as well.

We do not have the right to hoard our failures to ourselves. Our failures are gifts that have been given to us and we owe it to the world to share them with others. One of the things that separates us from other animals is our capacity to learn from the experience of others, and we dare not withhold that capacity from those who might benefit from it.

My experience can be of value to others and my failures are as much of my experience as my successes. If all I share with others are my success stories, I'm denying them a major part of the gifts that have been given to me.

We can let go of our failures because they are occasions for learning, not just for me, but for those I love as well.

And the fourth tool, the fourth gift that God has given to us in our failures, is that they teach us empathy. They teach us what other people feel like. They expand our capacity for being with and going with others who are facing uncertain roads ahead.

One of the greatest examples of this that I have ever heard was given in a TED Talk by Doctor Abraham Verghese.

TED is a nonprofit organization devoted to spreading ideas, usually in the form of short, powerful talks (eighteen minutes or less). TED began in 1984 as a conference where Technology, Entertainment and Design converged, and today covers almost all topics — from science to business to global issues — in more than 100 languages.

Over 2,000 TED talks have been archived on their web site and I encourage you to go there, from time to time, and listen to some of them. I can just about guarantee that, no matter what topic you lite upon, you will find the talks fascinating. I have never heard one that wasn't amazing.

Anyway, Dr. Verghes gave one of the most beautiful and moving TED Talks I've ever heard. It was called, "The Doctor's Touch" and he concluded his speech like this:

*I'm an infectious disease physician, and in the early days of HIV, before we had our medications, I presided over so many scenes like this. I remember, every time I went to a patient's deathbed, whether in the hospital or at home, I remember **my sense of failure** — the feeling of I don't know what I have to say; I don't know what I can say; I don't know what I'm supposed to do. And out of that sense of failure, I remember, I would always examine the patient. I would pull down the eyelids. I would look at the tongue. I would percuss the chest. I would listen to the heart. I would feel the abdomen. I remember so many patients, their names still vivid on my tongue, their faces still so clear. I remember so many huge, hollowed out, haunted eyes staring up at me as I performed this ritual. And then the next day, I would come, and I would do it again....*

I recall one patient who was at that point no more than a skeleton encased in shrinking skin, unable to speak, his mouth crusted with candida that was resistant to the usual medications. When he saw me on what turned out to be his last hours on this earth, his hands moved as if in slow motion. And as I wondered what he was up to, his stick fingers made their way up to his pajama shirt, fumbling with his buttons. I realized that he was wanting to expose his wicker-basket chest to me. It was an offering, an invitation. I did not decline.

I percussed. I palpated. I listened to the chest. I think he surely must have known by then that it was vital for me just as it was necessary for him. Neither of us could skip this ritual, which had nothing to do with detecting rales in the lung, or finding the gallop rhythm of heart failure. No, this ritual was about the one message that physicians have needed to convey to their patients. Although, God knows, of late, in our hubris, we seem to

have drifted away. We seem to have forgotten — as though, with the explosion of knowledge, the whole human genome mapped out at our feet, we are lulled into inattention, forgetting that the ritual is cathartic to the physician, necessary for the patient — forgetting that the ritual has meaning and a singular message to convey to the patient.

And the message, which I didn't fully understand then, even as I delivered it, and which I understand better now is this: I will always, always, always be there. I will see you through this. I will never abandon you. I will be with you through the end."

Thank you very much.¹

Our Failures — Our Gifts

Our failures in life can be painful, even heartbreaking. No one is denying that.

But what our faith offers us is a choice. My failures can be occasional chapters in the book that is my life, or they can be the whole book. I can, by God's grace, walk through them, learn from them, and then go on to the next thing, or I can choose to put down my roots there and dwell in them.

I can ignore them or I can learn from them.

We can, with time, come to see our failures as gifts, given to us to share, along with the lessons we have learned from them, with others. Or we can simply pretend they didn't happen, learn nothing and, consequently let no one else learn anything, either.

Our failures can, if we wrap them in our faith in God and our love for each other, be amazing gifts that can heal, edify, encourage and maybe even save those who are hurting, lonely, and lost.

Amen.

1. http://www.ted.com/talks/abraham_verghese_a_doctor_s_touch

CSS Publishing Company, Inc., [Like a Phoenix: Cycle B sermons for Pentecost through Proper 14](#), by Dean Feldmeyer