1. Children

Good morning, boys and girls. I want you to help me think about a hard word today. The word is "sacrifice." Can anybody here tell me what the word means? (Talk about it. If they don't know, give them some help.) Sometimes our parents will sacrifice for us. If we need new shoes and there isn't enough money, your folks may decide not to buy themselves a new jacket or dress, so you can have some shoes. They do it because they care about you.

Or you might sacrifice for a friend. You might give up something you really wanted to keep because your friend wanted to have it or needed it and you decided to give it to them because they are such a good friend. It may hurt to give it up, but you do it because you care about them.

Sometimes you even read stories about somebody sacrificing his life so somebody else's will be saved. A fireman may go into a burning building and drop a trapped person safely out the window into the net, but then die in the flames. Sometimes that happens. That's a costly sacrifice. But the fireman does it because he cares about the person he is saving.

The greatest sacrifice of all was on a cross one Friday afternoon. Here is one way to picture that sacrifice. (Show them the crucifix.) A crucifix (a picture of Jesus fastened to the cross) is not supposed to be pretty. It is supposed to make us squirm a little bit, and to feel sorry and sad. Jesus died for us. He did it because he cares about us. And the special thing about this sacrifice is that it is good for everybody and for all time. It is even good for people who haven't even been born yet! Isn't that amazing? God must really care a lot about us to do that.

Adult

"A prophet is not without honor," said Jesus "save in his own country." No wonder! Prophets speak to a people on the part of God. What nation on earth has ever lived up to God's standards? Not us. Not Israel. Not any nation that has ever existed on earth. We need to remember that as we prepare to celebrate our grand national holiday.

Our nation has been wonderfully blessed. It seems somewhat impertinent for me to say, "I'm proud to be an American." It was an accident of birth. I had nothing to do with it. Deep in my heart, however, I can say that I am grateful to be a resident of this land.

There was a story in Quote magazine many years ago that tells it all. It seems that in Vienna, Austria American, French, British and Russian soldiers share jeeps for military police duty. One group of them used to kill time by telling jokes. That is, the western ones did, for the Russians remained silent and sullen. The American asked, "What's the matter with you, Ivan? Doesn't anything funny ever happen in Russia?"

"Have you heard of the great canals in Russia?' Ivan asked.

"Yes," the American replied. "It must have been a hard job building them."

"Exactly," Ivan said. "They were built by people who told jokes."

Robert Orben says that the essence of America can be summed up in this exchange: A father told his son that all Americans belong to a privileged class. The son said, "I disagree." And the father said, "That's the privilege."

If there is anyone in this room who is not grateful to have been born in such a land, tell me about it after the service. I'm thankful to be an American.

Nevertheless, the Fourth of July is a dangerous day. Not because of fireworks, reckless driving, swimming accidents and such. It is a dangerous holiday because it can blind us to our real needs. Like the church at Laodicea in the book of Revelation, we can congratulate ourselves on being rich and be utterly blind to our poverty (Rev. 3:14 18).

I like the story of the Sunday School teacher who asked her class who the first man was. A little boy answered, "George Washington." She then informed him that the first man was Adam. The boy responded, "Oh, well, if you are speaking of foreigners, maybe he was."

Human progress did not begin with George Washington and Washington, D.C. is not the capitol of the world. We have been blessed, and at our best we have been a blessing, but there is a darker side to the American character as well, just as each of us have a darker side to our character. Ask the Native American. Ask the children of American slaves. Ask the homeless on America's streets.

Billy Graham spoke at an Honor America Day service at the Lincoln Memorial many years ago. He told of a picture that once appeared on the front page of a Chicago newspaper. It was a picture of Betsy Ross sewing the first American flag. Over the picture was the caption, "Time to check our stitches." On this fourth of July weekend, let us check our stitches.

There are three temptations that continually confront the American people. If you were standing up here this morning, you would list more. Every pastor has a list. Think how different the list would be for the Pope Francis compared to the Rev. Joel;Osteen I have no political axe to grind. I would simply focus your attention on three persistent temptations.

THE FIRST TEMPTATION IS TO ENJOY THE FRUITS OF CITIZENSHIP WITHOUT TENDING THE TREE OF LIBERTY.

Harry Emerson Fosdick spoke a few years ago entitled, "Parking on Another Man's Nickel." . Where can you park for a nickel today? The idea is still sound, however. You come to a parking place that has a meter. Someone else has already inserted a coin. Happily there is still time on the meter. This must be your lucky day. You pull in and park on someone else's nickel, or quarter or whatever.

Fosdick went on to say that some of us go all through life parking on someone else's nickel. Particularly is this true of us who are born into this free land. Someone's already paid in blood, sweat and tears for our parking place. The temptation is to enjoy our good fortune without taking responsibility for those who come after us.

You may know the story about the recent immigrant who was describing to a friend his beautiful new print the famous patriotic work, "The Spirit of 1776." He said, "There are three men in itone with a fife, one with a drum, and one with a headache."

We want to enjoy the fife and the drums without the headaches that go with citizenship. A father showed his son a copy of the Bill of Rights. "Remember, son," he said, "On the back of every right, there is a responsibility." He was right.

Many of us are giving in to the temptation to enjoy the benefits of citizenry while avoiding the headaches of civic responsibility. Is our community a better community because we live in it? Our city? Our state? Is the PTA stronger because we have a child in school? Can the United Way count on our support? These are not glamorous questions. These are simply the nuts and bolts of citizenship. Are you parking on someone else's nickel? That is the first temptation: To enjoy the fruit of freedom without tending the tree of liberty.

THE SECOND TEMPTATION OF THE AMERICAN PEOPLE IS TO WANT CAPITALISM WITHOUT COMPASSION.

Capitalism is not a dirty word in my vocabulary. Much of our prosperity is due to the genius of a free market. But where there is capitalism there must be compassion. Capitalism was born in the nursery of the Jesuits that God wants us to work hard to make the world better. The Protestants changed it to the Protestant work ethic that if we do good work, we will be rewarded in this world, and if we are successful, it is a sign that we are doing God's work. Then it found a home in Darwinism. The survival of the fittest has forever been its theme. Revolutions and depressions both testify, however, that we cannot forget the people who cannot compete with people at the bottom of society. If the government will not do its part, then we the people must.

Most of us have never known the effects of grinding poverty. Even those who have known it, have known it in a different way than the people at the bottom of society today.

Many of you lived through the depression. You know about being poor. The late Sophie Tucker recalled the poverty into which she was born. "We were so poor," claimed Sophie, "my parents couldn't afford children. The lady next door had me." Some of you know about that kind of poverty, still most of you will say, "We had plenty to eat. We had a stable home life. We could walk the streets of our neighborhood without fear." Most of you will agree it was a different kind of poverty than America's poor know today.

Others of you have had to struggle to get where you are today. "I fight poverty," says the license plate. "I work." But somehow you knew that your plight was only temporary. You knew there was hope. You were brought up with the American dream in your heart. That is not true of many of America's children today.

We have some serious problems in our land today that do not bode well for the future. Can you not sense it in the violence of street gangs, the proliferation of hard drugs, the disenchantment of the so-called "working poor?"

We simply cannot have capitalism without compassion! As George Bernard Shaw once wrote: "The worst sin to our fellow creatures is not to hate them, but to be indifferent to them; that's the essence of inhumanity."

The early church had such a powerful love for others that Luke records that "abundant grace was upon them all." They were experiencing the joy of serving a joy that can't wear a price tag.

This brings us to our final temptation. The privilege of citizenship without the price of civic responsibility, the bounty of capitalism without the bother of compassion. But one more.

WE WANT CHRISTIANITY WITHOUT CONVERSION.

Please bear with me. I'm not talking about a particular kind of emotional experience. I'm talking about a level of intense commitment to Jesus Christ. We have a lot of people who believe in God, who believe in the divinity of Jesus, who believe in heaven. Every Gallup Poll indicates this. We have very few persons, however, who want to take up the cross and follow Him.

How much difference does it make in your life to say, "Jesus is Lord"? Does it affect your manners and your morals? Does it keep in check your prejudices as well as your passions? Is the world a better place because Jesus died on the cross for you?

A businessman returned home one evening with a contract in his hand. It provided him and his wife with an opportunity to make a lot of money. In the quietness of the evening, he sat down and discussed the contract with her. He read it first, then passed it to her and watched the expression on her face as she read it. He waited for her response which was not long in coming. "Tom," she said, "you and I can't go into this."

"Why?" he asked. "Well, because....because of God," was the answer. "Yes, I know," Tom said. "That's what I had decided too." And so, "because of God," the contract was returned unsigned. Because of God, their lives had boldness at a time when boldness was required.(2) Can the same be said for you?

Former President Jimmy Carter will probably not go down in history as our most successful national leader. Only the most cynical of persons would doubt his commitment to Christ, however.

As most of you know, for the past several years he has been working with Habitat for Humanity, an organization of volunteers who help build and restore homes for the homeless. President Carter wrote: "There is a great satisfaction in being able to `make a difference' for someone who needs help. The tiredness that comes from any physical activity is all worthwhile, and the spirit sometimes soars...

"To help build a home for people who have never lived in a decent place and never dreamed of owning a home of their own can bring both a lot of joy and an emotional response. One only has to have had the experience to know what it means to the one who is giving time and energy and to the one who is receiving the new home.

"Soon after we began our work with Habitat, we asked Tom Hall, who had come to the international headquarters for brief volunteer service and had stayed for 5 years, `Why do you keep on staying?' His answer was, `I see the faces of those who receive the homes.' We have seen the faces, too." (3) Someday we will understand that the Biblical injunction is true: "It IS more blessed to give than receive."

So something to think about this Fourth of July weekend. Have you been enjoying the benefits of our society without the headaches of civic responsibility? Are you one of those citizens who believe that we can have capitalism without compassion and Christianity without conversion? We have much to be grateful for. We have even more to be committed to. It is not too late to get started. Let's live out our gratitude and at the same time insure this gift of freedom for generations to come.

(1) J. Daniel Baumann, AN INTRODUCTION TO CONTEMPORARY PREACHING, pp. 172173.

(2) Jerry Hayner, YES GOD CAN (Nashville: Broadman Press, 1987).

(3) EVERYTHING TO GAIN, Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter, pp. 9495).

Dynamic Preaching, Collected Sermons, by King Duncan

2

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) Pleaded. Begged. 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

3

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 whit, with fun — so others can learn from it as well.

We do not have the right to horde 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