

Rev. Julie Songer Belman
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Jeremiah 31:31-34

³¹The days are surely coming, says the Lord, when I will make a new covenant with the house of Israel and the house of Judah. ³²It will not be like the covenant that I made with their ancestors when I took them by the hand to bring them out of the land of Egypt—a covenant that they broke, though I was their husband, says the Lord. ³³But this is the covenant that I will make with the house of Israel after those days, says the Lord: I will put my law within them, and I will write it on their hearts; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. ³⁴No longer shall they teach one another, or say to each other, “Know the Lord,” for they shall all know me, from the least of them to the greatest, says the Lord; for I will forgive their iniquity, and remember their sin no more.

John 8:31-36

³¹Then Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him, “If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; ³²and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” ³³They answered him, “We are descendants of Abraham and have never been slaves to anyone. What do you mean by saying, ‘You will be made free?’” ³⁴Jesus answered them, “Very truly, I tell you, everyone who commits sin is a slave to sin. ³⁵The slave does not have a permanent place in the household; the son has a place there forever. ³⁶So if the Son makes you free, you will be free indeed.

Freedom to Fail

This week, we have celebrated our Freedom. Most of us, I hope, got to enjoy a day of rest with family and friends on Wednesday. I know a lot of you went to the beach, and it certainly was a beautiful weather to do so. I hope you, like our family, ate good food and spent time with good friends.

We come to worship today, realizing that we have MUCH to celebrate and so much to be thankful for. And we have come to church this morning to continue that celebration.

- Our choir has prepared some beautiful music,
- We have prayed for the women and men who have given their lives in service,
- We have affirmed for our children that they are loved by God and they can share this Good News with others!

All this is good. It feels nice and warm and fuzzy. A happy week of Let Freedom Ring! **Which sounds great, BUT.... today I'd like us to dig a little deeper into what FREEDOM really means for us as people of faith.**

As we celebrate the great sacrifices made on our behalf, I wonder when *YOUR* faith has led you to a place that might mean some risk and sacrifice?

When has your faith pushed you past your comfort zone into some new experience, where you felt God newly at work in your heart and your life?

I challenge each of us to think about what Freedom really means today.

I'm going ask you some questions that I'd like you to seriously answer.

You don't have to answer out loud - but answer for yourself. You may jot down your responses on your bulletin if you want.

1. What would you do if you could not fail?
2. What would you endeavor, dare, or try?
3. What mission would you attempt, what venture would you risk, what great project would you undertake?

I love these kinds of questions, because they stimulate our thinking, stretch our vision, and stir our imagination. But as much as I love these questions, I think they're the wrong ones for us, as people of faith, to be asking. Because there will be failure. There just will. **And if we only dream of doing things we can accomplish *without* failure, we will either be sorely disappointed or, we'll never try and end up living pretty small lives.**

So in light of today's Scripture readings, I want to ask another question - similar but perhaps both more realistic and more faithful:

What would you do if you knew you *might* fail and it just didn't matter?

I don't mean "didn't matter" in the sense that there would be no cost, or that it wouldn't be difficult or disappointing. What I mean is, **what would you try if the attempt itself was worth it, whether it succeeded or not?**

Or, even more, what would you risk if the ultimate outcome was GUARANTEED , even if your immediate venture failed?

I think that's a big part of what today's scripture readings are about. First, in one of the more difficult passages in the Gospel of John, Jesus invites us to imagine that belief in him brings the freedom of the heir, rather than the insecurity of a servant.

There is a harsh distinction in the ancient world between those who are "in" and those who are "out" of a family, its privileges and future, **and Jesus is inviting all of us to claim our inheritance as "children of God**, who were born, not of blood, or of the will of the flesh, or of the will of man, but of God".

Because Jesus has secured our place with God the Father, we are in every way, FREE. Free to venture, to risk, to try ... **and even to fail**, because it is God the Son who secures our place, position, and our future.

In Romans, Paul declares that we are made right with God not by works, but by grace¹. **And just as our successes do not *earn* our place in God's kingdom, neither do our failures disqualify us.**

Jesus tells us that our identity, worth, and well-being are not determined by our successes or failures, but by God's gift alone. And precisely because salvation is not up to us, but up to God, we are free to DO and TRY and RISK all things in the meantime, because whether we succeed or fail, God has promised to bring us (and all things) to a good end.

Still not sure? Then let's go to Jeremiah. Because in this brief passage the prophet, not only details Israel's absolute failure to keep the law, but also goes on to declare God's promise to do for Israel what they could not do for themselves by writing the law on their very hearts, by fashioning *in* them and *through* them a people of promise.

Moreover, the Bible says that when it comes to mistakes and failures (both theirs and ours!), God will just plain forget, remembering our sin no more. That's right, despite everything, **God doesn't just forgive but also forgets**. God develops a case of intentional amnesia when it comes to our sin and regards us as if we were perfect, blameless and whole.... God regards us as if we were Christ.

Can we even fathom how huge that is? God regards us as Christ himself!

A 21-year-old New Zealand woman experienced something along these lines last year, when she was brought before a judge. She had survived a suicide attempt, which was part of a suicide pact with another person. Her partner in this pact was much older than she was, and had been severely depressed for a couple years.

The young woman had tried to persuade her to get professional help. But finally the older woman decided she couldn't handle living anymore, and so they entered into the suicide pact together.

¹ Romans 3:24

The older woman's life was ended, but the young woman's attempt to take her own life was unsuccessful. And so she was brought to court to face charges.

Only one time before had a court passed judgment on someone in similar circumstances. This was a sentencing to test the wisest and most experienced judge. In deciding what the sentence should be, the judge of this case said she weighed two factors.

First, she said, the court must send a clear message on behalf of the community that life is a precious gift.

Second, a court that delivers justice on behalf of the community must never abandon mercy. Any punishment beyond a **conviction** would serve no purpose, she said.

“Now that I've met you I see that you are a beautiful young woman inside and out. You must leave here and LIVE, please... You are convicted and freed.”

You are convicted and freed!!! Wow – what a summary of the Christian faith!

My friends, I am here to tell you today that **we are convicted** – we can't help but fail! All have sinned and fall short of the kingdom

But also, we are freed – we are made right with God – we are justified by grace as a priceless gift from God.

So let me ask you those questions again:

What would you do if failure didn't matter?

What would you endeavor, dare, or try?

What mission would you attempt, what venture would you risk, what great project would you undertake?

Perhaps faithfulness itself is defined by **trusting God enough to dare impossible deeds?**

My friends, what is standing between you and the freedom God intends and desires for ALL people?

- What if you ignored it and pressed on anyway?
- What would be different in your life?
- How would your priorities shift?
- What causes would you champion? How would you vote?
- Would you spend your time differently? Your money differently?
- Would you work for justice, or peace, or equality, or any of the other handful of things that the world calls idealistic?

- Or maybe you would volunteer with Family Promise,

- or tutor a child at the Good News Club,
- or care for someone severely disabled,
- or befriend a kid who everyone says isn't cool,
- or visit an elder who most have forgotten,
- or reach out to someone overwhelmed by grief even though you don't know what to say.

So often, these things - whether great or small - seem either so hopelessly impossible or so ridiculously insignificant that we just don't try. **Yet the promise of the Gospel is that we are FREE... free to risk, to dare, to love, to live, to work, to dream, and to struggle ...**

Whether what we attempt seems great or small, likely or nearly impossible... we have God's promise that there is no small gesture and there is no impossible deed. **And for this reason we are free...** We are free even to fail, trusting that the God who raised Jesus Christ from the dead will also bring all things -- even our failed efforts -- to a good end.

Do you remember the movie Apollo 13, and the great scene when NASA's Flight Director Gene Kranz (played by Ed Harris), boldly declares, "Failure is not an option!"

Well, as inspiring as that line is, **we know the opposite is more often true: failure is often THE option.**

More to the point, if you're going to risk anything that matters, "not failing is NOT an option."

Risk, you see, entails failure. Change entails failure. Creativity and innovation and experimentation all entail failure. And if we forget that, we will either never try anything that matters, or end up sorely disappointed.

So this year, as we celebrate our freedoms...

**let us celebrate that our ultimate hope rests not in our successes,
but in God's great failure on the cross,
the failure that redeems all of *our* failures and successes,
binding them together in the promise of resurrection.**

This is God's doing, you see, and so we are free –

- free to risk,
- to dare,
- to love,
- to live,
- to work,
- to dream,
- to struggle, and even to fail...all in hope.

So do not fear and do not give up.

Keep the faith, keep on trying and failing, for God has promised to keep hold of us and to use us in ways we cannot imagine. Amen? Amen!

LET US PRAY: God of Celebrations and Sorrows, we give you thanks for your ever-moving, ever-changing, ever-empowering presence in our lives. Wherever we are today, we know that you meet us there. You love us. And you invite us into lives of great faithfulness. Open our ears to hear and our hearts to respond to the ministry and mission you have for us, the people of Bethel. Transform us this day, that we might be truly freed to be your disciples. By our attitudes and our actions, may we be people who seek to bring hope, comfort, healing, and peace. In Jesus' Name, we pray. Amen.