
Fruits of Failure

A sermon by Canon Cathy Zappa
Lent 1 – Year B

For as long as I can remember, I've been afraid of failure. And for good reason! It hurts! When I was in ninth grade, I ran for class president. I actually thought I'd be good at it and could win—so I really put myself out there! I rallied my friends, plastered posters with my name on them all over the school, and made a speech in front of the whole ninth grade, promoting myself. And then I lost. When the results were read, I was sitting in a large classroom with everyone else, trying to pretend like I'd always known that I wouldn't win, and didn't really care. But I did.

I felt so ashamed—ashamed that I'd thought so highly of myself and been such a disappointment, and that I'd so publicly misread the situation and my peers and my own merits. That shame stuck with me, so that it took me almost 25 years to put myself out there like that again.

But I did, finally, when I entered the discernment process for ordination. Again, I offered myself, and let everyone know that I was doing it and how important it was to me. It felt like I was turning my insides out, for everyone to see and judge, again. Again, I was told no. Again, I had to face family and friends and admit that I'd been rejected—that it seemed I'd gotten it all wrong, again.

They loved me anyway, and wouldn't let me listen to the negative voices that said I was no good. They were there for me when I failed, when I needed to nurse my wounds, and when I got back up and tried again.

I still do everything I can to avoid failure, of course. Some days, that means that I work really hard, and prepare and prepare, as a way to stay in control. Other days, I pretend that I'm not really trying and don't really care. Most days, I don't take many risks. Better to play it safe than sorry.

But increasingly, I'm finding that this fear and avoidance of failure is hurting me more than helping. For one, it's exhausting! And it keeps me from living this life, and from using my gifts, as fully as I can. It puts up a barrier between me and all those people who seem so much more perfect than me, which is pretty much everyone. On really bad days, it can even draw me away from God, which is one of the definitions of sin: that which separates us from God.

Now, let me be clear: failing is not a sin, and it's no cause for shame! Weakness, imperfection, mistakes: these are not sins! But they can be temptations to sin—to separate ourselves from God and others—if we listen to pride and believe that they render us unworthy of relationship or love, or that they're greater than God and God's grace.

But the fact is, when you've just lost the class election or been rejected by a discernment leader, it's hard to believe there's anything greater than your great failure. But there is.

One of the fruits of failure is that, as we come to terms with the fact that we aren't actually perfect or in control, we discover also the greatness of God's grace and learn to trust in God's steadfast love. And by God's grace, there are other fruits here, too.

There's also the fruit of fellowship, or connection. When (not if!) you have your next big flop, try trusting other people, as

well as god. Trust that you're not the only one who has ever fallen this hard or felt this rotten, and reach out! Share your story and your pain. Because the fact is that reaching out is how we resist the temptation of shame; and because your reaching out just might be a lifeline to someone else, who needs to know that he's not the only one, either.

Finally, there's the fruit of resilience, of learning how to fall and how to get back up again. A word to parents, here (including myself!): we all want to protect our children from pain, including the pain of failing, making mistakes, being embarrassed or rejected. I know I do! So when my child is trying out for a team, or auditioning for a play, the embarrassed ninth grader inside of me panics, and wants to jump in and help, and pipes up with anxious questions, "Are you playing your hardest in try-outs? Do you want to take an acting class first? Have you been practicing?" Which is really just my way of saying, "I don't want you to get hurt, like I did."

But this isn't what my children need to hear from me: that they should avoid failure at all costs. No, what they need to hear from me is that I've failed, too, and survived, and am even the better for it. They need to know that I'm proud of them for taking risks and doing what they love, regardless of whether it leads to a scholarship, or Olympic medal, or just plain fun. They need to know that I love them no matter what, and I'll be there when they fall and when they get back up.

What all our children need to hear from all of us, parents and this whole community, is that no matter how they fail, or how we fail them, or how others fail them, God's steadfast love will never fail them. And it will never fail us. Nothing we do or don't do can separate us from God's love.

A word to young people here, too, who may feel like the fate of the world, or your parents' or community's happiness, depends on your success or failure: know that it doesn't. You are going to mess up; and it's probably going to hurt and embarrass you. And you are going to get through it, and you're going to discover grace and develop strength and resilience along the way.

Grace, connection, and resilience: these are just some of the fruits of failure, and of Lent, too, this holy season when we confess that we fail, we mess up, we sin, we hurt, we are human, after all. We're able to confess these truths because we trust in the greater truth of God's grace. Because we trust that we won't be defined or remembered always by our mistakes, but by God's love. And because we trust that in confessing them, they lose their power over us and can draw us toward—not away from—God. "Remember us, O lord, not according to the sins of our youth or our transgressions, but according to your love." Amen.