



08/09/2020

Rev. Dr. Carlan Helgeson

Dear church family, Pastor Giuseppe needed a break this week so you get me today! It's been so long since I've been in the pulpit, though. I feel like a mosquito in a nudist colony...I know what to do, but I don't know quite where to start!

I guess I'll start with a question: "How is life going for you?"

We have quite a few golfers here at Nativity Lutheran. Did you know that when they were looking for famous golf sayings to inscribe in the Golf Hall of Fame in Pinehurst, North Carolina, the first expression selected was "Oh, no!" It's the most common phrase used on the course!

"Oh, no!" sums up a lot of our living, doesn't it? When it comes to choices in life, most of us have a list of goof-ups long enough to wallpaper in our house. Whether we like to admit it or not, most of us blunder our ways through life. I call it "the oops factor."

Sitting on the side of the highway near Homosassa, a state trooper was waiting to catch speeding drivers when along comes a car pattering at 19 m.p.h. He thinks to himself, "This driver is dangerous." So he turns on his lights and pulls over the driver. Approaching the vehicle, he notices an elderly lady driving and four women passengers, all with eyes wide and faces white as ghosts. The driver says to the patrolman, "Officer, I don't understand. I was doing exactly the speed limit. What seems to be the problem?"

"Maam," says the officer, "You weren't speeding, but you should know that driving so much slower than the speed limit can also be dangerous to the other drivers."

"Slower than the speed limit?" questions the lady. "No, sir. I was doing exactly the speed limit. Exactly 19 miles per hour," the woman says proudly.

The patrolman, trying to contain a chuckle, explains to her that 19 is the route number, not the speed limit. A bit embarrassed, the woman grins and thanks the officer for pointing out the error.

"Before I let you go, Maam," says the patrolman, "I have to ask. Is everyone in the car all right? These women seem awfully shaken up, and they haven't uttered a word the whole time."

"Oh, they'll be all right in a minute, Sir," she says. "We just got off Route 98!" ...Oops!

During a firefighter's strike in England some years ago, the British army took over emergency services. They were called out by a lady in South London to retrieve her cat from the roof. They arrived with impressive haste, cleverly and carefully rescued the cat, and started to pack up when the woman, so grateful for the squad of heroes, invited them all to tea. Later, while driving off with fond farewells and vigorous good-bye waving, the men backed over the cat and killed it...Oops!

All of this is to say that life is full of mistakes, full of blunders, full of goof-ups and mess-ups. It's not a matter of *if*, only of *when* and *how often* we have to deal with the oops factor. Sometimes these oops moments are embarrassing; sometimes they are frustrating; sometimes they are even hurtful. Yet I believe the most damage these moments do is not to others, but to ourselves, particularly to those of us raised in Christian homes where we were taught to be scrupulous, obsessed with the details of doing things properly. If we love proper etiquette and decorum, we find failure difficult and even sinful. How *are* we supposed to deal with the mistakes of our lives? By looking to God's Word in the Scriptures, of course!



Today I want to point out three principles from the Bible to help us move past the oops moments in our lives.

First of all, don't make the oops moments into more than they are! Don't overvalue the mistakes of your life!

You need to distinguish between the blunders of your life and the sins of your life. Not all failures in life are sinful. Far fewer of them are spiritually damaging than you may think.

The "king" of oops moments in the New Testament is Peter. He wins that honor hands down! Our Gospel reading for today gives us a glimpse of one of those not-so-stellar moments in the chief apostle's life. Jesus had sent the disciples ahead of him across the Sea of Galilee when a storm came up. Jesus arrives early in the morning, walking on the water in the midst of the treacherous waves. Peter is fascinated by this display of supernatural power and asks Jesus to invite him out to join him. The Lord beckons him, "**Come!**" so the awestruck disciple climbs out of the boat in the midst of the storm and begins walking on the water. It was a highlight of his life. Peter, the fisherman, who has spent so many years working on the water, so many desperate times trying to avoid drowning in the water, now finds himself waltzing across the waves with miraculous ease. It was a beautiful moment, a moment to be recited to friends and recounted to grandchildren...until Peter looks around and starts sinking in fear. Turns out, he became a big disappointment because he took his eyes off of Jesus.

On another occasion Jesus called Peter "Satan" because the disciple tried to dissuade the Lord from following the path to the cross. And in the courtyard of the high priest's home while Jesus was on trial, this disciple who pledged to follow his Lord to death denied that he even knew Jesus. Yet with all these failures, never once did the Lord demand that Peter confess and be forgiven. We may be embarrassed by our stupidity, frustrated by our inability to succeed, bedeviled by our lack of courage and cleverness; but these are not sin.

If you forget an important date, is that sin? If you say the wrong thing and upset someone, is that sin? Not if you have no desire to hurt someone, no intention of acting against God's ways, no selfish plan to serve yourself at the expense of others! Alexander Pope wrote, "To err is human; to forgive is divine." Somewhere along life's journey we have to learn that *it is not a sin to be human!* After all, if that were true, Jesus could never have been truly human at all as our creeds confess!

And speaking of the Lord, did you ever stop to think about the failures of *his* life? Jesus failed to win his own hometown people of Nazareth to God. He failed to change Judas Iscariot. He failed with the majority of his fellow Jews who abandoned him. He failed to convince the religious leaders of his truth. Yet in the face of these human failures, Jesus held on to the truth of God's love. We need to do the same.

Don't put burdens on yourself that you were never meant to carry. Don't beat yourself up for being human. Don't make your mistakes and blunders into sins when they are not. Jesus never turned Peter away for his mistakes; Jesus continued to treat him as the head disciple. He demonstrated God's love and mercy and understanding of what it is like to be human with imperfect knowledge and imperfect living. It is the devil who uses our mess-ups in life to try to destroy us, not God. God is in the business of restoration.

What weighs heavy on you today? What mistake eats away at you? What poor choice of words or actions keeps replaying in your mind? How has the oops factor damaged your life? Can you see it from God's perspective? In the Twelve Step programs, the second step reads: "We



came to believe that a Power greater than ourselves could restore us to sanity.” That Power is God. God can help us see truth when we are blind to his love and wisdom. Don’t let your failures become more than they are.

A second principle comes from the first: Learn to leave the oops moments behind! Get beyond your failures!

Never underestimate the damage you can do to your life’s purpose and hope when you hang on to the mistakes that God has long ago forgotten. Whether forgiven sins or simply poor judgments and blunders, God leaves the past behind a lot more quickly than most of us do.

Hanging on to past mistakes zaps us of the courage we need to be confident in life. It keeps us from taking the risks we need in order to do the spectacular things God has planned for us—like walking on water!

The odds against rolling a perfect game of bowling are about 225,000 to one. One bowler was knocking out a perfect game. He got eleven strikes in a row. He was just about the throw his last ball when suddenly he stepped off the alley, packed up his ball and shoes and walked out, never to set foot in a bowling alley again. He just couldn’t do it! Why? Because he couldn’t risk the chance of failing! Yet by not risking it, he missed his chance at a perfect game.

What failure *can’t* you risk because of your fear of making a mistake? What would you really like to do with the time you have left in this life? What does your heart tell you that you *should* be doing? What would bring you the most joy, the most contentment, the most meaning in life because you know that God is calling you to do it? But the risks are great...and so you walk away, time and again, living in the world of regret. You have hung on to so many mistakes in life that you can’t bear to make another big one.

Even just one big regret can spoil the whole of life. Just one small unshakeable memory of regret, one small opportunity for past failures to harass our self-esteem and belief that God loves us, can ruin our whole life. As a pastor, I have seen it over and over again: good, well-intentioned people drowning in regret and stuck in a past that torments their every day.

In the third chapter of Philippians, the Apostle Paul wrote, **“Not that I have already obtained this or have already reached the goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me his own. Beloved, I do not consider that I have made it my own; but this one thing I do: forgetting what lies behind and straining toward what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus.”**

Paul leaves the past behind because he is focused on what lies ahead. That’s how we need to live our lives, too! Don’t spend your precious hours and days reliving the mistakes of yesterday! Let go of them!

One politician I have admired in my life is Jimmy Carter. When he lost his bid for a second term as President in 1980, it was a crushing defeat for an incumbent. A lesser man would have slinked away into the shadows of private life and been silenced by the failure. Yet Carter took a different view of things. He had tried his best, had done his best for the country. He had made mistakes, but not intentionally. Instead of giving up, he made the rest of his life count for something. Now Carter is perhaps the most respected peacemaker in the world, as well as a model of Christian servanthood. At age 95 and a survivor of cancer, Jimmy continues to teach Sunday School in his home church in Plains, Georgia, and to work on building homes with Habitat for Humanity. He was able to leave past failures behind and get on with life. Can you make that same choice? Learn to leave the oops moments behind!



Finally, this principle: Use your oops moments to make you a better person! Grow from your failures; don't let them diminish what you uniquely bring to the world!

One of the failures of life is our inability to see what's really important, particularly when we are young. As we get older, sometimes things become a lot clearer, don't they? At least if we are willing to learn from our mistakes!

How many of you were very particular about eating and drinking in the living room when your children were young? Why, you practically had a hissy fit when your kids put even a glass of water on the fancy furniture in the house! Fast forward forty years to now when you are grandparents. Now you are letting your grandkids not only bring drinks into the living room but eat tacos and pizza in it, too! How come the youngest generation gets away with what the previous generation could never do? Chalk it up to wisdom! You see, the spills of life never mattered much anyway, did they? It's the gift of life—beautiful, healthy, breathing, promise-filled life—and the relationships of love and family that matter most. If the pandemic has taught us anything, it is that! Sofas wear out whether we eat on them or not. It's the sharing of family life that makes lasting memories.

When I look back at the foolish mistakes I made in younger years, I try to make up for it when I can. If I have been too hard on people, too judgmental, too self-righteous, too proud or careless with people's feelings in the past; I want to be different with those I meet in the present. I can't go back and change the past; I need to let go of my mistakes. Yet those past blunders can make me a better person right now. That's what growing older is supposed to be all about, isn't it? As we age, aren't we supposed to be less rigid and set in our ways and more flexible and accepting of those who are different from us?

The only way I know how to get to this point of grace is to admit to ourselves that we have had our own share of failures and regrettable moments. As the 14th century spiritual great, Thomas à Kempis wrote, "Do not be angry that you cannot make others as you wish them to be, since you cannot make yourself as you wish to be."

Who are we to talk about the failings of others when we have so many ourselves? In the Epistle to the Romans, Paul wrote, "**We who are strong ought to put up with failings of the weak, and not to please ourselves. Each of us must please our neighbor for the good purpose of building up the neighbor.**" In other words, we ourselves fail, so why does it come as a shock when other people fail? Instead of making a capital offense out of someone's shortcomings, we need to stick with them and encourage them in spite of their mistakes. Isn't that what God does with us? How can we, with a rap sheet of mistakes a mile long, act harshly toward others? Those who recognize their own humanness can treat others with greater kindness and patience, greater charity and grace.

Last week the death of Congressman John Lewis was much in the news. The 80-year-old civil rights icon was a proponent of non-violent activism in spite of being beaten and jailed 40 times in his life. One of those beatings was done by a Klansman named Elwyn Wilson, who at age 19 assaulted Lewis at a bus station in Rock Hill, SC. Many years later Oprah Winfrey had both men on her program. During the interviewing a remorseful Wilson was on the verge of breaking down when Lewis reached out and took his hand, announcing to the audience, "He's my brother." That act of extravagant kindness took the breath out of those who witnessed it.

When George W. Bush was inaugurated in January of 2001, Lewis boycotted the event believing that Al Gore was the rightfully chosen President. Yet last weekend, it wasn't Al Gore but



former President Bush who eulogized John at his memorial service, praising him highly as a leader and a friend. It was an amazing gift of grace.

What is it that allows a man beaten by a former Klansman to call him “my brother?” What is it that lets a former President heap glowing praise on a man who boycotted his inauguration? It’s grace—the grace that understands that we are all foolish and impulsive at times, but Christ saved us, and we can be better today than we were yesterday. In our Gospel lesson when Peter was on his way to drowning and cried out to Jesus, the Lord **reached out his hand and caught him**. Jesus brought the faithless, fearful, bumbling Peter back into the safety of the boat. And this failure of a man became, in the end, the epitome of courage whose faith inspired and changed the whole world.

What does this all mean for us, dear church family? We are treading on stormy seas right now in our land. We are in danger of drowning in a worldwide pandemic, in danger of succumbing to the fear of ever finding a just peace in our country again, in danger of being overwhelmed by arguments over truth and righteousness. Some of these dangers have even come into the church—people throwing friendships out the window, hunkering down in smug positions, and coming to verbal blows. What shall we do, beloved? Are we no different than the world? Has Christ’s presence in us made no difference at all?

Don’t make your mistakes greater than they are; otherwise you have nothing to offer in the church! Don’t hang on to the blunders of your life; otherwise, your own tormented spirit will torment others! Don’t fail to learn from your past failures; otherwise you cannot become the kind and humble saint who is called to be Christ to the world!

Many times in the past has the Lord reached out and rescued us from a sea of troubles. In these stormy days of life, may you look past the tumult around you and find in Jesus alone your truth and hope. And when the Lord rescues you and restores you again, may God use you to bring light and love to your family, to your friends, to your church, and to the world!

Amen!