

RISING AGAIN AFTER YOU FALL: PETER'S STORY

WINNING ISN'T EVERYTHING

Kelly Boyte Brill
Avon Lake UCC
27 October 2019

This Friday, November 1, is All Saints Day. It's a good day to think about the people you have known who have been like saints for you - people who have helped you grow in your spiritual life, and it's a good day to express gratitude for what those people have meant to you. You might reflect this week, too, not just on people you've known personally but on all of the people you admire - and why. What qualities do you look for as you look for role models, heroines, heroes, saints?

If we look at the values that come to us from the Bible, we will not look up to people just because they're famous or talented or rich. Rather, we'll look to the people who are using what they have to lift up others. One of the people I admire is Bill Gates, not because he's wealthy but because of what he does with his wealth.

This summer, Bill Gates spoke at the Economic Club in Washington DC and he talked about some of his biggest mistakes. He said that several years ago Microsoft was working on developing an operating system to compete with the Apple iPhone operating system. They let their guard down and allowed the Android system to beat them out. It was a 400 billion dollar mistake. He calls it "one of the greatest business mistakes of all time." And then he went on to say, "It's fine to celebrate success but it is more important to heed the lessons of failure."

In case you're worried about Bill Gates and tempted to send him some cash, he's recovered nicely...he has slipped from being the wealthiest person in the world, but only because he's giving his money away. Jeff Bezos from Amazon is now #1.

Bill Gates says that the ability to learn from his failures is part of the reason he has been successful, not only in business but in life.

What do we learn from the times when we make mistakes? What do we learn from loss? That is going to be our focus for the next five weeks in this series, "Winning Isn't Everything."

The Bible is full of stories of real people - real people who, just like you and me, make mistakes, experience loss and face disappointment. We'll be looking at some of those stories in this worship series.

As I have been preparing for this series, I've been doing some introspection and soul-searching, reflecting on my own life. Some mistakes are just plain embarrassing. All we can do is laugh about them. I know, for example, that I will never live down the fact that I almost set the church on fire one Christmas Eve. If you haven't heard the story, ask someone who's been around a while - or buy me a cup of coffee in Coffee Hour and I'll tell you all about it.

Sometimes our default is shame. We feel so awful about a mistake that we let that mistake affect how we feel about ourselves. Instead of realizing that no one is perfect, that we all experience failure, we start to think, "I am a failure."

In fact, our worship design committee wrestled with the wording we're using in this series. I suggested that we encourage people to think about the question, "What I've learned from failure"...one member of our team said "I'd encourage us not to dwell on that word 'failure.' Too many people internalize things and think that they personally are failures when things don't work out." It was a helpful and wise comment. We all fail, but no one is a failure. No person is ever a failure.

Shame is not helpful. What IS helpful is self-reflection. Being able to sit honestly with ourselves and saying, “What can I learn in this moment? What can I learn about myself, about life? What is this moment teaching me that will help me become a better person or help others? I want to stay in this moment, even though it’s painful, until I have learned all I can from it, and then I will move on, having grown.”

If we feel ashamed, we can’t learn. If we try to deny the pain we’re in, we can’t learn. If we try to sweep it under the rug, ignore it, pretend it didn’t happen, not only are we not learning and growing, but the pain of the moment will never fully heal.

You’ll notice that we have a sports image for this series - a scoreboard. That’s because there are numerous stories from the world of sports about lessons learned from loss.

I read an article earlier this year that was an impetus for this worship series. It was a review of a show on Netflix called “Losers.” This documentary series tells the stories of eight athletes whose careers are largely defined by falling short of victory. The series reminds us that nobody is a winner every week. Whether you are an athlete or a coach, your character is defined more by how you handle your losses than by how you handle your wins.

This quote reminds us that wins and losses are a part of every life: “Stop being jealous of people in their winning season. You don’t know what they lost in their losing season.” We may not advertise on social media the times we made horrific mistakes, but disappointments and failure are a part of EVERY life.

One of the best examples of learning by losing in recent sports history comes from the University of Virginia basketball team. Ryan Bennett became the coach at

UVA after the 2009 season. This past spring, in his tenth year, Bennett led his team to win the NCAA championship. But it has not been an easy, steady rise to the top. For the prior thirteen years, his teams at two different schools failed to make the Elite Eight. The talk was, “He’s a great coach, but he can’t win in March.” That trash talk seemed to become reality in 2018 when the University of Virginia became the first-ever #1 seed to lose to a #16 seed in the first round of the NCAA basketball playoffs.

You know how such events are described: with words like “historic” and “stunning.” Bennett has talked often about how he coped with that loss, and how he helped lead his team after that loss. The sports world, the media ridiculed them. Bennett says this, “When you miserably fail, in an epic way, it refines you. I knew it was going to be a significant challenge to overcome it. Two weeks after the loss, my wife said to me, ‘This might not make sense to you now, but you have the privilege in this moment to remain faithful to the values that are meaningful to you.’” Bennett reminded himself of what was most important, the five core values he’s always taught his teams: Humility, passion, unity, servanthood, thankfulness. And then his wife showed him a TED talk which he showed his players. In the midst of the TED Talk was this quote, “If you learn to use adversity right, it will buy you a ticket to a place you couldn’t have gone any other way.”

Tony Bennett sat with a disappointment long enough to learn something from it. Instead of letting a loss define him, and making him feel ashamed — instead of ignoring it and letting it haunt him, he let it REFINE him and inspire him to become an even better leader. He put winning and losing in perspective - he talks about it here:

<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ITPn24ipl2Q>

In 2018, Virginia lost by 20 points as a massive favorite; and in 2019, it pulled off miracle after miracle, in part because Tony Bennett had the strength of character to give his team a second chance.

There is no failure if you learn.

And in the Christian story, there are always second chances. And third chances. And new beginnings morning by morning, season after season, grace upon grace.

Our scripture this morning is about Peter, Peter one of the disciples in Jesus' inner circle. Peter is always close to Jesus but he also struggles to understand who Jesus is. Peter is the one who tried to walk on water, but couldn't. He is portrayed as the most human of the disciples, so much wanting to follow Jesus and yet making so many mistakes. Near the end of Jesus' earthly life Peter wrestles with the cost of following him. Beau read us several passages from the end of the gospel of John. First we see Peter boldly stating his commitment to following Jesus, and Jesus predicting that what instead will happen is that Peter will deny even knowing him. "Three times, Peter; three times; you'll deny even knowing me. And then the rooster will crow." That, of course, happens on the day that Jesus is standing trial.

Peter is standing outside while Jesus is inside being interrogated. There's a buzz in the area. The crowds in Jerusalem are large because of the Passover celebration. Word spreads that Jesus of Nazareth has been arrested and may be crucified. The atmosphere is tense. People remember the huge group that welcomed Jesus on Sunday. Now, five days later, that Jesus may be put to death. In the midst of this fear and anxiety, three different people say to Peter, "Aren't you one of his disciples? We're

you in the garden with him last night? Don't you know Jesus?" And each time, Peter says, 'No. I'm not.'

When that rooster crows, can you imagine how heartsick Peter feels? And how it feels for him to watch Jesus' body being dragged through the city, and beaten, and nailed to the cross? Maybe Peter doesn't feel responsible exactly, but I'm sure he feels like he's failed Jesus.

The writer of the gospel of John gives us a beautiful story of an appearance of Jesus after the resurrection. A few of the disciples are fishing on the sea of Galilee. They're out all night but they don't catch a thing. Morning comes, and Jesus is standing on the beach, but the disciples don't know it's him. He says to them, "Cast your nets on the other side of your boat." They do, and the nets immediately fill. When they have breakfast together, they recognize Jesus and Jesus says to Peter, three times, "Peter, do you love me?" And three times, Peter says, "Yes, Lord, you know that I do." Each time, refining himself, redeeming himself, second chances, third chances, grace upon grace upon grace.

And so it is for us. Because we are loved, because we are created in God's image, because we have received grace, our mistakes do not define us. We learn from them, and grow, more and more into the people we are meant to be.