COMPASSION LIKE JESUS SERMON SERIES

***Standing Tall***

Mark 10: 46-52

Pastor Robyn Hogue October 28, 2012 Skyline Presbyterian Church

What would you do if you couldn’t fail? What would you endeavor, dare, or try? What mission would you attempt? What venture would you risk? What great deed 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 to ask. 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, realizing the naïveté of the question, never try.

So in light of today’s scripture reading, I want to ask another question—similar in nature 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 would be difficult or disappointing. No, 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?

In Romans, Paul declares that we are justified not by works—that is, by our successes or accomplishments—but by grace (Romans 3:24). And just as our successes do not earn our place in God’s kingdom neither do our failures disqualify us. As Martin Luther, reading Paul, came to recognize so poignantly, if our salvation depended on our efforts, we would have no cause to hope. For as Paul says, and as each of us knows by experience, we have all sinned and fallen short. But God in Jesus tells us that our identity, worth, and well-being is not determined by our successes and 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, speaking for God, 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, God says that when it comes to their—and our!—sin and failure, God will just plain forget, remembering our sin no more.

So let me ask 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 deed would you undertake?

Would you, like Bartemaeus in today’s Gospel reading, shout out for healing even though the people around you try to shush you into silence? (Mark 10:47-48)? I wonder, could it be that Bartimaeus was so used to failure and disappointment that he saw no reason *not* to try one more time? Or perhaps faithfulness itself is defined by trusting God enough to dare impossible deeds.

Whatever the case, would that be your cry? For healing? Or maybe your shout would be for justice, or peace, or equality, or any of the other handful of things that the world calls idealisitic. Or maybe you would volunteer at a food bank, or tutor a child who needs help at school, or care for someone severely disabled, or befriend a kid who everyone says isn’t cool, or visit a senior who most have forgotten, or reach out to someone overwhelmed by grief even though you don’t have a clue 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. Because we have God’s promise that there is no small gesture and there is no impossible deed. And for this reason we are free … even to fail, trusting that the God who raised Jesus from the dead will also bring all things—even our failed efforts—to a good end.

There’s a scene from the movie *Apollo 13* when NASA’s Flight Director Gene Kranz (played by Ed Harris), boldly declares, “Failure is not an option.” But as inspiring as we find that line, we know the opposite is more often true: failure is *regularly* the option. More to the point, if we’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 never try anything that matters or end up sorely disappointed.

This past week I heard a story about Martin Luther that I hadn’t heard before that seems appropriate for those observing Reformation Sunday this week. I knew that Luther died in Eisleben, the place of his birth, bringing his work and life, in a sense, full circle. And I knew that he preached his last sermon there after successfully negotiating disputes between several local magistrates. What I didn’t know was that only five people showed up for the sermon. What I didn’t know was that he was outraged. He wrote a friend about the event, despairing over what he feared was a “failed” reformation.

While I can understand his dismay and disappointment, I nevertheless think that at that moment Luther forgot that much of our energy and effort will be given over to failed endeavors. He’d forgotten that is, Paul’s reminder that we have all sinned and fallen short … and will keep falling short. Moreover, he’d forgotten that our ultimate hope rests not in our successes but in God’s great failure on the cross, the failure that redeems all failures and successes, binding them together in the promise of the resurrection. He’d forgotten, that is, his own words at the close one of his hymns called *A Mighty Fortress is Our God*, “Let good and kindred go. This mortal life also. The body they may kill. God’s truth abideth still. His kingdom is forever.”

This is God’s doing, you see, and so we are free—free to risk, to dare, to love, to work, to dream, to struggle and even to fail … all in hope. So this week do not fear and do not give up. Stand tall. If you wonder at times whether many of the things you attempt for God fail to reach the ends you’d hoped for them, know that they probably do! Yet God promises to use them anyway. So keep the faith, keep the word, keep on trying and failing, for God has promised to keep hold of us and to use us in ways we cannot imagine.