

Failure in the First Degree – Mark 15: 1-39
Sermon prepared and preached by Rev. Don Hammond
For First Central Congregational UCC Omaha, Nebraska
April 5, 2009 (Palm Sunday)

I have a rhetorical question for you. Have you ever failed at anything? I don't mean getting a "B" in school when you were accustomed to getting "A's." That is not the kind of failure I am talking about. I don't mean the failure of that first young love that never blossomed. I don't mean the loss of a job that was the result of an economy gone down the tubes. I mean a real failure, the kind of failure that either came close to or did devastate you. I mean a failure that knocked you down so hard and far that you doubted that you would ever get back up, much less recover from. Have you ever failed in a way that embarrassed you so harshly that you avoided conversation that might raise it to life? Have you ever failed in a way that you were convinced that, if your failure were known, that you would be reduced in stature to friends and community?

I believe we live in a culture that is "failure phobic." Our culture likes the successful people, that is, the people who are good at everything and anything they do, the people who are cum laude students. Have you ever heard of a football coach being hired because he failed at winning enough games at his last job? Can you imagine the University of Nebraska hiring such a coach? Coaches and managers are fired quickly when they fail to win enough games and championships.

I have had two devastating failures in my life. One occurred when I was very young. The other took place in my first pastorate out of seminary. My first such failure was when I repeated the 9th grade. I remained in junior high school when the kids I went through school with moved on to high school. It is difficult to describe the feelings of despair I held for no less than the entire 2nd year of 9th grade. Long after I completed high school I would avoid any conversation that would draw attention to that embarrassing failure. I wanted it to remain a deeply buried secret that I had such a failure.

The other great failure I had in my life was even more devastating. I was in my first congregation after ordination. Of my two years there, the first year was wonderful, but the second year was disastrous. Everything that could go wrong did go wrong and they fired me at the end of my second year. I was new in pastoral ministry and made many mistakes. When I asked why they were firing me the best reason that gave was because I had not shoveled the snow. Even though I was the 5th pastor to be fired by them in 10 years, I was devastated, and became convinced that I would never become the pastor I had hoped to become. Our second son was only one week old when they told me to go away. I came close to abandoning both pastoral ministry and the Church.

We entered one of the most brutal winters we ever experienced - and without a house or income. People we knew opened a room in their house where the four of us, and our dog, stayed. It was warm.

My lowest point was just before Christmas, only three months after I was fired. The only job I could find was as a produce clerk in a local grocery store. One day the pillar of the congregation, a woman who was the driving force to fire me, entered the grocery store and found me tending the produce. Fumbling through the lettuce she turned to me and said, "go into the back and see if you can find better lettuce than this." I fell to my lowest point. My despair and failure were heavier than anything I believed I could manage. I saw myself as a *Failure in the First Degree*. What was odd was my newly developed perspective of the Church. The people who molded, shaped and nurtured me were people I met in the Church. From this I discovered that the most vicious, mean spirited people I ever met were now also among people I met in the Church.

I was certain that I was finished as a pastor. Search committees don't hire pastors who have been bounced. Good fortune prevailed, and a congregation hired me. I hid my failures as if they were the plague. I can't recall exactly how, but somewhere during those years I became tired of hiding those parts of my life, and became open and candid about those difficult times.

Today is Palm Sunday, and it is an energizing and heroic time in the life of Jesus, and we in the Church tend to like this day. Jesus is a success. He is

riding into town as a messiah cum laude. Everyone knows this, and welcomes him for what he has done and for what they expect he will do. He has been nothing short of successful during his three years prior. He healed people who were terminally ill. He raised people from the dead, a little girl he did not know, and his good friend Lazarus whom he did know. He explained scripture and history better than any rabbi had ever done. He confronted the warriors and defenders of tradition, and he stimulated the imagination and hope of the desperate. How can anything greater or more successful be dreamt? But then, things began to change quickly. Soon, he began to show signs of failure. The great messiah was not showing game-winning signs of overthrowing the Romans. The great golden orator was not able to open his mouth enough to defend himself when Pilate told him to do so. The great healer and restorer of life to the dead was not able to get himself off the cross. The great savior of the world was not able to save himself. In the eyes of nearly every person who was in Jerusalem that week, Jesus became, and was convicted of being, nothing more than a *Failure in the First Degree*.

Harry Emerson Fosdick was the Senior pastor at Riverside Church in New York City. He was one of the most significant Church leaders to challenge fundamental Christianity. His accomplishments are many, and frequently we sing the hymn he wrote, *God of Grace and God of Glory*.

When he was a young man he suffered a serious “nervous breakdown.” He later spoke of it:

“It was the most terrifying wilderness I ever traveled through. I dreadfully wanted to commit suicide, but instead I made some of the most vital discoveries of my life. My little book, “The Meaning of Prayer,” would never have been written without that time of mourning and grief. I found God in a desert. Why is it that some of life’s most revealing insights come to us not from life’s loveliness but from life’s difficulties? As a small boy said, ‘Why are all the vitamins in spinach and not in ice cream, where they ought to be?’ I don’t know. You will have to ask God that, but vitamins are in spinach and God is in every wilderness.”

And Jesus did appear to be a *Failure in the First Degree*. He was not living up to any person's expectations. The people who loved him and placed their hopes in him did not want to see him humiliated and killed. The people who hated him did not want to see him succeed, and with excitement enjoyed his death as proof that he was nothing more than a *Failure in the First Degree*.

I have always been interested in history. I am particularly interested in the history of World War II, perhaps because it was a pivotal defining time for the entire world. A figure of that era that I am only now learning about was Father Maximilian Kolbe, a Polish Franciscan priest. During the Nazi era he housed in the friary 3,000 refugees, 2,000 of them Jews. He was arrested and sent to Auschwitz, the death camp. The rule at Auschwitz was if anyone should escape, ten would be executed. A prisoner went missing, and ten were chosen for execution. One of them, a man, cried aloud that he would be leaving his wife and children with no one. Father Kolbe, having heard that, stepped forward and asked to take the man's place. The request was granted and he was executed. The saved man lived and later reported this story and said: "I was stunned...I, a condemned man am to live, and someone else volunteers to give his life for me, a stranger."

Most people might believe that to be a foolish thing to do – a clear indication that he was a *Failure in the First Degree*. Thank God for failures.

Little did I know 30 years ago that my great failure would mold me into something I would never have imagined. Thank God for failures.

Little did the people, who developed a love and hope around the life of Jesus and then watched him die, imagine that this *Failure in the First Degree* would change the heart and mind of countless numbers of people who would participate in his failings. Little did they realize there would be many Father Kolbes in the world, people that would not conform to definitions of "success" of any culture. Little did people imagine that people of the tomorrows would do the strangest of things. There would be people that would give more of themselves for others than can ever be called "normal." Can you imagine all of that coming out of someone who was humiliated and scorned and identified as a *Failure in*

the First Degree? Thank God for failures because they mold us. Thank God for failures. What would the world be like without them?

Amen.