

A cop in our church in Portland, OR asked to meet with me one morning. He said it was urgent. It was. He told me about an arrest he tried to make on a Portland street a few days before. The suspect pulled a gun on him. He was less than ten feet from the officer. He pointed the gun and pulled the trigger twice. Twice his gun failed to fire. By then the cop from our church had drawn his own weapon and shot the suspect dead.

He just needed to tell his pastor about what had happened, and we talked and prayed together as pastors and their people do. I also came to a realization that day. The officer told me that he was on mandatory administrative leave; and I thought how different that is from television and the movies. If a TV cop kills someone, he's back next week, ready for action. In police stations across this country, the cop is placed on administrative leave while an investigation is made into his use of deadly force, and the policeman receives counseling to evaluate his psychological health after killing someone.

And then I had a revelation. Television (and movies) go to great lengths to seem realistic. But as my cop friend in Portland illustrates, they can be very unrealistic. That lack of realism should be our master clue to the meaning of movies and television. They are not about realism; they are dreams of what kind of people the artist thinks we are.

This meditation on the meaning of movies and other modern storytelling got a new life, when I read a recent editorial in the Wall Street Journal by Peggy Noonan. She was in Iraq last year, and “she asked an Iraqi military officer doing joint training at an American base what was the big thing they had come to believe about Americans in the years they'd been there. He thought “You're a better people than your movies say.” (<http://online.wsj.com/article_email/SB10001424052970204552304577115051424219634MvOjAxMTAvMDAwMjEwNDIvWj.html?mod=wsj_share_email_bot>)

If I'm right about the meaning of movies, then the Iraqi officer was saying, “You are a better people than your artists think you are and represent you to be.” I'd go further and say that we aren't happy with our failures as a people; and we aspire to being better people than many of our movie-makers give us credit for. Our New Year's resolutions are one small way we dream of being better.

These January sermons are a way of taking those resolutions seriously. We talked last Sunday about being very intentional about making good resolutions. The Sunday before that we talked about the significance of priorities in keeping our resolutions. Today, we have to talk about the big threat to our resolutions – failure. You resolve to lose weight in 2012, and on February 15, you discover that you have gained two pounds. It's easy at that moment to think, “What's the use? I gave it my best shot, and six weeks into the new year, I'm further behind.”

Our Streak of Lawlessness

That's why today we need to talk about the blessing of failure. Let's start where we left off last week. I showed you the most sobering description of human nature in any language. Look with me again at Romans 7:15. **I do not know what I am doing. For what I want to do I do not do, but what I hate I do.** Most of us know from first hand experience what Paul meant.

The apostle came back to the same idea in verse 19. **For what I do is not the good I want to do; no, the evil I do not want to do – this I keep on doing.** There is something in human nature that loves what is good. There is also something in our human nature that is lawless. That lawless streak in you can override the good we love. It's that strong, and it can do it when we least expect it.

The lawless streak in our nature can do serious damage to New Year's resolutions. The better you know yourself, the more you know that your New Year's resolution could come to nothing, because you may prefer to keep doing what you have resolved to change. You will have failures in the year ahead. Don't give up when you let down. Don't be an all-or-nothing person. Expect failures. But don't give up. Can you learn from your failures? This is not easy. We need an example of the blessing of failure. I have one. I hope it gives you courage to carry on in the face of failure.

Night of Tears

Let's start with words of Jesus that anticipate Easter week for us, but for the men who first heard these words they made no sense. Mark 10:33-34: **"We are going up to Jerusalem," he said, "and the Son of Man will be betrayed to the chief priests and teachers of the law. They will condemn him to death and will hand him over to the Gentiles, who will mock him and spit on him, flog him and kill him. Three days later he will rise."**

He may as well have been talking to a stone wall. Listen to the next verse. **James and John, the sons of Zebedee, came to him. "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask."** Jesus asked them what they had in mind. They came right to the point. **"Let one of us sit at your right and the other at your left in your glory"** when you seize political power."

When the other ten disciples of Christ heard about that, **they became indignant with James and John.** Some of them were as ambitious as James and John, and they didn't like that James and John were grabbing for power before they had a chance to.

Now, fast forward to Mark 14. Jesus had instituted what we call Holy Communion. He finished off in verse 25 by saying, **"I tell you the truth, I will not drink again of the fruit of the vine until that day when I drink it anew in the kingdom of God."**

He must have left them reeling. He had said at their last meal together that one of them was going to betray Him. He talked about bread that didn't mean what it had always meant and about wine that now meant blood. It didn't make sense, and what happened next was so unexpected and offensive that it knocked the first confusion out of their minds with even great confusion.

Verse 27: **"You will all fall away," Jesus told them, "for it is written: 'I will strike the shepherd, and the sheep will be scattered. But after I have risen, I will go ahead of you into Galilee.'**

Peter declared, "Even if all fall away, I will not."

"I tell you the truth," Jesus answered, "today – yes tonight – before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times."

But Peter insisted emphatically, "Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you." That's why we love Peter. He was passionately and desperately flawed, just like us. **All the others said the same,** but I have a feeling that they said it because Peter said it He was the clear leader among the disciples.

So, off they went to the Garden of Gethsemane where Jesus prayed and Peter slept and Judas came, and the authorities hauled Jesus off to the Jewish court called the Sanhedrin. And the disciples who only a few hours earlier had said they would die with Him fled in fear for their lives. Except for Peter! Somewhere in the Judean night he came

to his senses and remembered his brave promise to Jesus, and he made his way right into the courtyard of the High Priest, where they were interrogating Jesus.

The drama in the courtyard began to parallel the drama in the courtroom. Verse?: A servant girl **saw Peter warming himself. She looked closely at him. “You also were with that Nazarene, Jesus.” But he denied it. “I don’t know what you’re talking about,” and he went out into the entryway.** That’s once.

She **saw him there and said again to those standing around, “This fellow is one of them.” Again he denied it.** That’s twice.

After a little while, those standing near said to Peter, “Surely you are one of them, for you are a Galilean.” He began to call down curses on himself, and he swore to them, “I don’t know this man you’re talking about.” That’s three.

Immediately the rooster crowed the second time. Then Peter remembered the word Jesus had spoken to him, “Before the rooster crows twice you yourself will disown me three times.” And he broke down and wept.

The man was in ruins. The others nursed their fears and their hatred for Judas in the Judean night. Harsh realities had dashed their high hopes and their lofty ambitions. But Peter was in ruins, overthrown by a mystery so dark as to shatter light.

The Blessing of Failure

There is an old proverb from the playgrounds of childhood: “The bigger they are, the harder they fall.” When Peter **insisted emphatically, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you,”** he spoke like a big man. When he disowned Jesus three times, he fell hard.

When you fail, you are faced with the hard reality that you are not all you thought you were cracked up to be. And that, my dear congregation, is the beginning of the blessing of failure. The Bible says: **If anyone thinks he is something, when he is nothing, he deceives himself** – Galatians 6:1. Moments of failure can be moments of truth, when we shed some of the illusions we have about our goodness and importance.

Moments of truth hurt. They are dangerous moments. You can give in to self-pity. You can give up. Don’t do that. Don’t waste the failure. Failure to keep a New Year’s resolution does tell us an inconvenient truth about the streak of lawlessness in us. It also tells us something about our distance from God. The greatest blessing of failure is to acknowledge our distance from God and turn back to Him and ask Him for forgiveness and a new start.

Turning back to God is not making restitution to God for your lawlessness. The good news of Christianity says that Christ died for our lawlessness, and God raised Him from the dead to bridge the distance between Him and us.

The decisive turn back to God is when you believe that God raised Christ from the dead and say so publicly. If you have never made that decisive turn, why not do it right here, right now? Don’t worry about saying the right words. Just tell God you believe He raised Jesus from the dead. If you do that, be sure you say so publicly. Be baptized. Join the Church. Don’t be a secret Christian.

Resolutions and Beyond

I’d like to end this meditation on the blessing failure with a comparison of two men. Failure is not always a blessing. Hear the following.

Then Judas Iscariot, one of the Twelve, went to the chief priests to betray Jesus to them. They were delighted to hear this and promised to give him money. So he watched for an opportunity to hand him over – Mark 14:10-11.

But Peter insisted emphatically, “Even if I have to die with you, I will never disown you” – Mark 14:31.

Now the betrayer had arranged a signal with them: “The one I kiss is the man; arrest him and lead him away under guard.” Going at once to Jesus, Judas said, “Rabbi!” and kissed him – Mark 14:44-45.

Then everyone deserted him (Jesus) and fled – Mark 14:50. Peter followed him (Jesus) at a distance, right into the courtyard of the high priest. There he sat with the guards and warmed himself at the fire – Mark 14:54.

Immediately the rooster crowed the second time. Then Peter remembered the word had spoken to him: “Before the rooster crows twice, you will disown me three times.” And he broke down and wept – Mark 14:72.

With the reward he got for his wickedness, Judas bought a field; there he fell headlong, his body burst open and all his intestines spilled out – Acts 1:18.

Two men, two terrible failures; but their failures were of different kinds. Judas intended to betray, and he succeeded. That was his failure. Peter intended to sacrifice, and he failed. That was his failure. Peter’s passionate vow never to disown Christ was rash, but it was the right kind of vow. Judas in his darkness vowed something quite different.

Even so, after his ruinous denials, Peter thought it was over. He was about to illustrate for us why, when it comes to New Year’s resolutions or even greater matters, you can’t do it alone.

John 21 reports the first time Jesus and Peter met after that terrible night in the courtyard. It was early morning by the sea. Jesus comes down to the seaside. That brings us to verse 15. **When they had finished eating, Jesus said to Simon Peter, “Simon, son of John, do you truly love me more than these?”**

“Yes, Lord,” he said, “you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my lambs.”

Again Jesus said, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

He answered, “Yes, Lord, you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Take care of my sheep.”

The third time he said to him, “Simon, son of John, do you love me?”

Peter was hurt because Jesus asked him the third time, “Do you love me?”

He said, “Lord, you know all things; you know that I love you.”

Jesus said, “Feed my sheep.”

Three questions for three denials! Peter was back; but he wasn’t the same man who failed in the courtyard of the High Priest. He began there by the Sea of Galilee to experience the blessing of failure. Peter owned the hard reality that he was not as righteous and important as he had imagined. Painful as it was, He accepted Christ’s offer of a fresh start.

There is no greater liberation than to realize that you are not as righteous and important as you have always thought. It frees you up to acknowledge how are you really are from God and to turn back to Him and ask Him for forgiveness and a new start, whether it is a New Year’s resolution or deep Christian devotion. You begin to experience the blessing of failure.