
WHAT WOULD YOU ATTEMPT
IF YOU KNEW YOU COULD NOT FAIL?

When working with congregations and individuals and talking with them about their futures, I like to ask this question:

- “What would you love to attempt if you knew it couldn’t fail?”

Maybe you’ve been asked that question before or asked it of yourself: “What would you attempt if you knew it couldn’t fail?”

- Think about that for a moment. [Short pause]
- Have you got your answer?

I like that question because it encourages us to cast our gaze beyond our present circumstances and those things that limit our lives, and toward a greater possibility.

- That can be hard to do, though.
- I think we are hard wired as adults to evaluate risk and danger and to opt for what is safe and secure,
 - to go for the sure thing.

The wife of my best friend from seminary is an extreme example of that.

- She grew up in a very volatile place as a daughter of missionaries,
 - and those missionary parents were constantly placing their children in extremely risky situations without consideration of how it was impacting them.
 - As a result, she reacts to the completely opposite end of the scale from what I was just speaking.

For a time, our two families lived in the same city and often spent our free time together.

- Once we went to the dells of a nearby river—a place where the river expands and flows slowly over a very large flat rocky area.
- While my friend and my daughters and I walked around that flat area, jumping from rock to rock and enjoying the sounds and the beauty of the river,
 - my friend’s wife remained up on the lookout platform away from the river, while she held her two daughters close to her.
 - “I know I’m cheating my daughters out of a lot of fun and experiences,” she told my wife, “but I just can’t let them go.”

Unfortunately, we too often overestimate risk and danger,

- and the outcome is that we underestimate possibility.

Now I realize that my original question came with the caveat, “if you knew you could not fail,” and that sort of removes the risk.

I know that we live in a world where the possibility of failure is real.

- So, asking a question like that must be done at the right time.
- Because when you’ve just come out of difficult time or harmful experience, most people don’t have the resources to imagine a future that, while brighter, may also be more challenging and riskier.
 - A measure of confidence and relative safety helps one to take on even greater challenges.
 - It also helps to have a backer, or mentor, or advocate to help provide those gentle nudges—
 - someone to support you, who has your back, who will champion your efforts and encourage you.

In a sense, that's what Abraham (then called Abram) receives from GOD in today's first reading.

- "Don't be afraid," the LORD tells Abram, "I will guide you and protect you and give you offspring and a future you could not have imagined."

Now if someone had asked Abram what he would do if he knew he could not fail, I don't know that he would have answered that he would pull up stakes, move across a continent and try to have a family.

- But that's what he did.
 - And that's what vision and promise do—they enable you to try things you've never previously dreamed.

One could read JESUS' promise in much the same way:

- "Do not be afraid, little flock," HE says, "It is your FATHER'S good pleasure to give you all things."
 - And from that astounding promise comes the invitation, rather than command, to dream and prioritize and share and prepare for what could come—
 - and to set aside those things that get in the way of possibility and vision and promise.
 - And that's also an important distinction—between invitation and command.
 - Sometimes the only difference is the force with which the statement strikes you.
 - "Do not be afraid, little flock."
 - A command infers pressure and demand.
 - But when followed by the promise, "It is your FATHER'S good pleasure to give you all things," it suggests freedom.

Promise always leads to freedom.

- Because of that promise of JESUS, we are free to give away, to create new relationships, to care for others, to lose ourselves in service,
 - and in all those ways find our security and confidence, not in our earthly possessions—like the inheritance the man in last week's lesson wanted JESUS to acquire for him—
 - but rather in our relationship with GOD.

What an amazingly different message that is than the one we hear in our culture and especially so much today.

- Rather than telling us not to be afraid, we are regularly bombarded with a relentless message that we should fear, well, just about everything.
 - And this kind of fear has the effect of limiting our vision and paralyzing our actions,
 - and thereby make it difficult to imagine a hopeful future, much less work to make that future a reality.

So, perhaps the question I asked at the beginning needs to be modified to be a better action motivator.

- Perhaps I need to change that question a bit to help us envision possibilities toward which we might actually move
 - and that allows us to take on the real challenges in front of us.

Instead, let me ask that question this way:

- What would you attempt, dare to try, not if you knew you could not fail, but rather if you believed that failure didn't matter?
 - Not "didn't matter" in the sense that there are no consequences, but rather "didn't matter" in the "it's not the end of the world" sense?
- What would you attempt if you believed that failure didn't matter?

Look at Abram or Abraham.

- He would fail and at times spectacularly.

And, for that matter, the followers of JESUS as well.

- Just think about Peter trying to walk on the water.

- He failed miserably, but it didn't matter because in the end, the lesson he learned was incredibly important for his future ministry.

- Peter and the disciples carried the message of the gospel to the rest of the world, trusting that their futures were not secured by their success or lost by even devastating setbacks,

- but because their freedom to act was granted and secured by GOD'S good pleasure and promise alone.

- GOD'S promise freed them to envision and risk for a future others could never imagine or think possible.

That's really one of the calls of the church today—to become a place where people are so rooted in the promise of GOD'S good pleasure, reminded of their identity as GOD'S beloved children, and affirmed in their inherent self-worth and dignity,

- that they can dare to dream and then step out in faith to make those dreams real.

The invitation for a Christian, you see, is about discovering that when we give ourselves away in relationship and service to others, we find a deeper sense of self than we'd imagined possible.

- We are a born-again community and find our sense of self and meaning and purpose as we trust GOD'S promise and give ourselves away in love.

So, take a moment again to consider that question, "What would you attempt if you believed that failure didn't matter?"

- Not necessarily in our church, but in your family, or neighborhood, or in the world.

- What would you attempt? [Pause]

Have you got it?

- Now take one step closer to working for that possibility by turning to others near you and telling them about your vision and then listen to theirs.

What would you attempt if you believed failure didn't matter?

- Why not go for it?

- Live into the freedom GOD'S promises and work for the Kingdom of GOD that JESUS proclaims.

- The world so much needs the gifts and passion that you have, the words you can speak, and the love you can show.

Don't be afraid, little flock. Go for it.

- Failure doesn't matter.

- Because it is your FATHER'S good pleasure to give you all things no matter what.

- So, what would you attempt?