FAIL FORWARD

**Notes at the Door (Part 3) | Romans 12**

Over the past few weeks, I’ve been trying to leave some NOTES AT THE DOOR for you and this church as you enter in late January a new season under the leadership of Steve Carter, the next Lead Pastor of Christ Church. So far, I’ve given you a note about the importance of continuity and about the necessity of change. I started this series by reflecting on a short list of some ESSENTIAL beliefs and commitments that I hope you’ll continue to focus on as you go into the future. In this noisy, conflicted world of ours, it’s easy get distracted and to start majoring on the minors and lose sight of the Classic Christian vision and values that the church was founded on. Work to keep your focus on and stay united around the biblical basics of our faith and this church will thrive.

Last week, I went the other direction and urged you to stay open to all the ways you may need to change as individuals or as a church to serve God’s purposes in years ahead. I pray you will not get stuck in a rut because that’s the way Dan did it. The Christian mission is enduring but the methodologies we use to pursue that mission need to be flexible. With your help (or kind tolerance), we did a lot of renovating and innovating during my time here. As Steve takes the lead next year, I hope you’ll stay alive and available to the new things God will want to do in you and through this church in the years ahead.

But as you move into that future, I want to acknowledge that there may be some moments of turbulence. I hope not, but as our church is a varied collection of human beings it wouldn’t be surprising. Over the course of our nearly sixty-year history, Christ Church has had some disagreements and family fights we’ve had to work our way through. Back at the beginning of our church, our founding pastor was nearly run out of town by a group of people that wanted him to adopt their political stance on issues of the day. Within my first five years, a substantial campaign arose to oust me, alleging that I or my staff had failed various tests of theological orthodoxy and leadership competence.

The truth, of course, is that the staff and people of Christ Church have never been perfect and likely won’t be till Jesus comes again. Over our nearly six decades, we’ve not been immune to moral failures and reprehensible behavior by leaders and members alike. I’ve got a list of leadership decisions I wish I hadn’t made, or had made faster, or had handled with much more intelligence and care -- and our founding pastor, Dr. DeKruyter had his own list before me, because he talked with me about it when I came.

I say all of this just to underline a simple point: Christ Church has never been a resort for saints. It’s always been a recovery group of sinners seeking the Savior. Chances are, it will be this way in years ahead too. Your next pastor and the people of this church will commit more than their own share of errors, fouls, and strike-outs. But I hope you will be in the future – as we’ve somehow managed to be in the past -- a community of people who when they fail, make every endeavor to ***FAIL FORWARD***. By that I mean, I hope you’ll seek to respond to whatever sin or struggles you face not with the discouragement, despair or division that comes from fear but in the constructive, forward-tilted way that comes from faith in Christ the Redeemer. Let me say a bit more about that.

As I’m sure you know, the Bible teaches that we all fail. Some of us are better at minimizing that or denying that or excusing that or covering that, but before we can appreciate the Gospel (literally, the good news), scripture begs us to face the tough news that: **All have sinned and fall short of the glory of God (Rom 3:23).** We all fail a lot. I don’t know about you, but sometimes I’m sort of amazed at the perseverance of some of my failure patterns. Sometimes it’s my failure at the professional level that shocks me. *“Now, why didn’t I talk to this group of people before I made that decision? Or how did I make this change or say that thing from the pulpit without pondering those implications?”* Other times, my failure is at the more personal level: *“Why in that situation at home or work did I not control my tongue, or restrain my pride, or manage my anger or handle the truth or flee that temptation like I know Jesus would and like I want to?”*

Do you ever examine yourself in this way? Do you ever confess it to someone else or to God? One of Jesus’ most famous and faithful followers did. Listen to what the Apostle Paul confesses: **I do not understand what I do… For I do not do the good I want to do, but the evil I do not want to do—this I keep on doing. 20Now if I do what I do not want to do, it is no longer I who do it, but it is sin living in me that does it (Rom 7:15, 19-20).**

It strikes me that saying something like this is part one of what it looks like to ***FAIL FORWARD*** -- the FIRST step of which is to acknowledge my failure. Remember how I said last week that it would be great if we could adopt the Home Depot question with one another: *“What are you working on?”* Well, I’ve been working for a lot of my adult life on learning to acknowledge my failures. I blame no one but myself for this, but I grew up thinking that it was not OK to fail. I developed this pattern of spinning things so that I could deflect responsibility for my failures. People would react to something stupid or selfish or insensitive I’d done or said and my response was: “Oh, I didn’t mean that,” or “I didn’t have any other choice,” or “You made me…” or “Oh, I’m sorry YOU felt that way” or “Let’s talk about your issues instead.”

It took me a long time to understand the SECOND key to Failing Forward. I needed to remember that failing doesn’t mean that I AM a failure. I think one of the reasons why many of us struggle to be honest about our failures is that we fear that they define us. What we did or failed to do is WHO WE ARE. But Jesus says otherwise. On one occasion, Jesus stepped between a lynch mob and a woman they were about to stone to death for the crime of adultery. Jesus made it clear: I don’t want you to keep committing adultery: **Go, now and leave your life of sin.** But, first, he made it even clearer: **I don’t condemn YOU (John 8:11)**. Yes, failures have real-world consequences. They can disfigure you, but they don’t define YOU, especially if you Fail Forward.

There are some failures that require we be removed from the place where we have done damage or take a time out or suffer some penalties. But there is no failure so big that God cannotforgive it. If Christ could forgive the people who crucified him and the heinous thief on the cross next to him, there’s a lot of hope for you and me too. Whatever failures in your life are discouraging you and, perhaps, you fear have defined you, bring them to Jesus and trust this scriptural promise: **If we confess our sins, God is faithful and just to forgive us our sins and cleanse us from all unrighteousness (1 John 1:9).**

There’s one further idea that I want to impress upon you as we think more about how to Fail Forward. This might sound strange, but I’ve increasingly come to let failure be my friend and wonder if it could be so for you as well. I don’t mean that we should ever come to LIKE SIN or like the significant mistakes we make in life or leadership, but how amazing would it be if one of the defining characteristics of this church was that it was full of people who’d learned to find the redeeming benefits of failure and help others do that too.

I sometimes think of the consequences of our failures as like a tree that falls on us, pinning us to the ground. I can think of numerous times in my leadership here or in my life as a husband or father when I did something stupid or insensitive or outright disastrous and the tree of consequences came timberrr-ing down on me till I felt like I was crushed. Over the years, I’ve learned to look for fruit on that tree and try to eat it. I have found that digesting the fruit nourishes me, reduces the weight of the tree on me, and makes it a bit easier to eventually climb out from under it

My question for you is: How has experiencing the consequences of failure ever been beneficial in your life? If you are feeling crushed by a failure now, what might be some of the fruitful benefits of this? Let me suggest a few possibilities. Sometimes failure can expose our sin so that we can repent of it. I’ve shared this story before, but I remember one particularly dark night of the soul during my first five years here when I felt like I’d been crushed by a falling tree. [Tell story of ill-conceived building campaign, resulting conflict, and God’s voice: *“When did it become about you, Dan?”*]

The great Scottish pastor,Oswald Chambers, once said that sometimes: *God disciplines us by disappointments.[[1]](#endnote-1)* We often think of discipline as punishment but Proverbs 3:12 tells us that God’s discipline is simply the kind of tough love that makes us better people. The root of the word discipline is the word disciple. God lets us feel the pain of our failures so that we see and turn from our sin. One of the great values of staying for a long time in a church, or a marriage, or a friendship or a team is that, eventually, we stop blaming others for our problems and face our own flaws. And, if we do, God will use our failures to propel us forward.

I think that another potential fruit of failure is that it can reveal what ideas and practices don’t work, so you can improve them. In this regard, I think of the story of the Apostle Peter. Peter was a generally good man who operated with some wrong ideas and practices. For example, he had the idea that he should stop Christ from going to the cross. He hacked off a soldier’s ear because he couldn’t imagine how Jesus’ suffering could be part of God’s redemptive plan. Peter also had this practice of talking big and then not delivering. He made big promises about his faithfulness to Jesus and then, when the pressure was on, he denied and abandoned Jesus. We can be like Peter at times: No suffering God. Lots of talk about faithfulness.

When we meet Peter after the resurrection, however, he is a chastened and changed man. He now knows that his ideas and practices had been wrong. He humbly comes to Jesus and Christ restores him. There is a legend that wherever Peter went to preach after that, some heckler in the crowd would crow like a rooster, to remind Peter of what a failure he was. But that taunt became a testimony of God’s power to transform and use people who are willing to FAIL FORWARD.

I’m reminded of the renowned business executive who was asked by a young intern to share the secret of her immense success. “It’s simple,” she said. “I made good decisions.” “But how did you learn to make good decisions,” the young man rejoined. “That’s even simpler: Bad decisions.” I love how Thomas Edison looked at the learning process he underwent while trying to invent what we now call the lightbulb. Edison once observed: “*I have not [just] failed 10,000 times—I’ve successfully found 10,000 ways that will not work.”* So, what are your failures teaching you? What ideas and practices are you changing because God is showing you, they don’t work?

You are going to have a new Lead Pastor in January. He’s going to make some mistakes. Some of you are going to makes some mistakes in your response to him. I understand that, because I went through this myself. It’s truly something of a miracle of God’s grace that I am still your pastor after all these decades. There were many people who wanted me out and a few times I wanted out! Thankfully, there were some mature Christians who said to the upset people: *“Let the young man learn. He’ll get better.”* And there were other wise followers of Christ who said to me: *“Let the congregation learn. They’ll come to see why God brought you here.”*

My advice is to keep going back to the instructions for life together that we find in Romans 12 and try to hold yourself to that standard, particularly after you’ve failed. And try to remember the wisdom that Theodore Roosevelt, the 26th President of these United States shared many years ago. It will help temper the way you might otherwise be inclined to treat one another. Roosevelt said, at the end of the day: *“It is not the critic who counts: not the [one] who points out how the strong [person] stumbles or where the doer of deeds could have done better. The credit belongs to the [one] who is actually**in the arena, whose face is marred by dust and sweat and blood, who strives valiantly, who errs and comes up short again and again, because there is no effort without error or shortcoming, but who knows the great enthusiasms, the great devotions, who spends [themself] in a worthy cause; who, at the best, knows, in the end, the triumph of high achievement, and who, at the worst, if [they] fail, at least fails while daring greatly, so that [their] place shall never be with those cold and timid souls who knew neither victory nor defeat.”*[[2]](#endnote-2)

Dare greatly and strive valiantly to honor God’s purposes, Christ Church.But when you or your pastor do not get it all right, let your failures humble you and expand the generosity of your spirit. Let them make you more compassionate and resilient people. As Chuck Swindoll, once remarked: *Failure is simply a stepping-stone on a longer path to the fulfillment of God’s purposes in and through your life*.

There’s no great church without long-term pastors who love them. And there are no long-term pastors without a great church of disciples willing to learn to love them. So keep learning and serving Christ together. And when you fail – like Adam or Eve, and Sarah or Abraham, and Moses or Hagar, and David or the Woman at the Well, and Peter or Paul, and Art or Gladys DeKruyter, and Dan or Amy Meyer… strive to FAIL FORWARD… because chances are that God is not yet finished doing all the wonders HE will do in and through us as we keep following Jesus.

1. "Where God Hides His Glory," *Christianity Today*, November 8, 1985, p.29. [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Theodore Roosevelt, speech at the Sorbonne, Paris, April 23, 1910. [↑](#endnote-ref-2)