
The Word We Don't Mention

Ruth 1, John 6.66-8

A Sermon preached at the Duke University Baccalaureate on May 8/9 2009 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

I'm thinking right now of young man who left college ten years ago. He went into consulting work on the East Coast. He spent a bit of time on Wall Street, and had a spell out West learning how companies work. Three or four years ago he and a couple of others set up their own company. It was tough at first but soon it became quite a success. He had a chance to sell it to his original employer but it meant too much to him to sell so soon. That company was his life, his identity, his pride, his joy. January just past it all went wrong. The company slid into bankruptcy like a sandcastle engulfed by the incoming tide. The young man saw his dream disappear and his security, prestige, and self-esteem melt away with it. Four months later, to my knowledge, his mother and sister have yet to find a way even gently to refer to the subject with him. His life is shrouded in silence and dominated by the F-word: failure.

Here we are, celebrating the great feat of entrepreneurship at the heart of our culture – that's to say taking someone else's money and someone else's ideas and turning them into a degree. You don't get into Duke without a bulging resume – and for many people life at Duke is about continuing to cram the suitcase full of experiences and journeys and conversations and projects. But lurking behind the gothic pillars lies a shadowy voice whispering the word we don't mention: failure. The terrifying prospect that after four years of rehearsal at Duke we'll go out on the stage of the big wide world and find that the auditorium is empty. Everyone out there simultaneously got a call from their bank manager and suddenly left the theatre.

Of course we have sophisticated strategies for calling failure something else. We call it broadening our experience. We call it a learning curve. We call it a blind alley. We mutter things like "If it doesn't kill you, it'll make you stronger." We quote Kipling and say "If you meet with Triumph and Disaster, And treat those two impostors just the same" – even though we know that's nonsense and triumph and disaster are not impostors at all, they're in fact as real as anything we can imagine.

Another approach is to adjust our sights and aim so low that we can't fail. When a person appears to be lazy it's often a mask for a fear of failure. Being lazy means you can go on saying "Just you watch me when I go" – in other words, if I really *did* try, I really *would* succeed. The Irish humorist Oscar Wilde said "There's only one thing worse than not getting what you want – and that's getting it." In the film *Chariots of Fire*, Harold Abrahams is a young Jewish man with a fantastic ability to run. He has to overcome various kinds of prejudice, but he nonetheless spends years preparing for the 100 meters at the 1924 Olympics in Paris. There's a poignant scene shortly after he's won the race. Abrahams is sitting in the changing room, nursing his precious gold medal. His team-mates crash into the room to congratulate him; but his trainer holds them back. Looking at the static, oblivious figure of Abrahams, the trainer says to the team-mates, "Hold on, wait, stand back, give him a bit more time and space. You don't know how difficult it is to win."

What I take him to mean is, even when we *do* achieve our ambition, we then have to face the rest of our days, and realize how small our life projects really are. Failure protects us in some ways, because we can remain obsessed by our unfulfilled goal. We only notice its insignificance if and when we attain it. It's difficult to win, because then the striving is over and all the fantasies truly threaten to unravel. I've had the privilege to know a few Nobel Prize winners. You'd think they'd be a proud and arrogant bunch, but they're quite the opposite. They tend to mumble self-effacingly about only getting the award because it was a bad year. It's as if genuine achievement is even more humbling than failure, because it makes you realize how small you really are.

We've just read together two profound and moving stories of failure. The first comes from the book of Ruth. Naomi has a husband and two sons, and both sons take wives from outside the land of Israel. But Naomi's husband and two sons all die, and she says to her two daughters-in-law, "Our situation is hopeless – go back to your own people." One daughter-in-law heads home, but the other, Ruth, clings to Naomi and says, "Don't press me to leave you. Where you go, I will go; where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God." It's a heartbreaking scene, in which Ruth, in the face of poverty and possible death,

says that, for her, there's something that means more than self-preservation and survival. That something is loyalty and love. In showing such steadfast love against all expectations, she shows us the face of God in a way we might never have seen it if she'd been lucky and successful.

The second story comes from John's gospel. Jesus is finding that a lot of people who hung around him earlier on are turning away from him. He looks at his right-hand man Peter and says. "So, are you going to go away too?" It's as if the whole of the future of Jesus' ministry hangs on this one question. Maybe the whole of the future of Christianity rests in the balance. Is it over, then? Like Ruth, Peter says there's something more important than popularity and circumstances. And that's love and loyalty. He says "To whom can we go? You have the words of eternal life." It's almost like he's saying, Jesus, even if you've failed, your failure is still more important than anyone else's success. Again, Peter shows us the face of God, because God sticks with us even when no one else does, even when it looks like there's nothing in us that's worth sticking with.

The story of Ruth is a story of bad luck. The story from John's gospel is a story of rejection. But they're both stories of failure. Failure isn't just down to our own weakness – it's often down to simple bad luck or unaccountable rejection. Why do we fear failure so much? I'm going to suggest why. Around about 150 years ago, in Western societies, belief in hell started to go out of fashion. It's hard to exaggerate the importance of this gradual cultural change. When people believe in a final judgement and in everlasting heaven and eternal hell, there's only one judgement that matters and that's God's judgement, and only one failure that counts and that's the failure to enter heaven. But when you gradually take hell out of the picture, all sorts of judgements become sought after and relevant, and correspondingly there become a thousand ways to fail. We come to fear earthly failure in the same way we fear death – in fact failure becomes a kind of equivalent of death – which is why the young man's mother and sister found they couldn't even mention the subject to him. Our earthly successes become our quest for immortality, and if we fail, it's like a double dose of death. We crave success, and the reason we crave success is that success appears to be the way we transcend our contingent mortality.

But in different ways, religious faith is built on the insights of failure. The history of Islam begins in earnest when Mohammed the Prophet is virtually thrown out of Mecca and makes his way to Medina to look for more fertile soil for his message. A key to understanding Judaism is to see the despair of the Jews when they were dragged into exile after the invasion of the southern kingdom by the Chaldeans. When they left Jerusalem they thought they were leaving God behind, but when they got to Babylon they discovered God was there too. And failure is also at the heart of Christianity. After all, the symbol of Christianity is a man dying alone in agony, rejected by the great many and abandoned by the close few. Christianity is founded above all on the forgiveness of sins, which is something you only get to discover the day you have the courage and the humility to say "I realize I've been wrong and I've failed and I'm sorry." Christianity is like a 12-step program: you only get to be part of it if you're prepared to say the terrifying words "I have failed."

The terrifying truth is, we all fail in the end. Life begins the moment you fail, and the moment you admit you've failed. Until then you're living in a fantasy bubble and if no one's yet burst it for you it's less likely to be because they think you're immortal and more likely because they're not optimistic you could cope with living outside it. Of all the moments of insight and self-knowledge in my own life, one of the most significant I think was at the age of about 7 when I realized I wasn't going to be a professional soccer player. The rest of my friends took another 5 years or so to make the same discovery. I've always felt that that gave me a head start because I spent 5 early years not living in the fantasy land that surrounded my friends. I was quicker to realize I was a failure than they were.

A friend of mine was lamenting the demise of the non-profit he'd been running and got into a conversation with an army commander. "Failed, did it?" said the commander, abruptly. "Your fault, or someone else's? Learn anything from it? Still lose sleep about it? Do anything differently next time?" The commander kept barking out the questions, but as each one cascaded down it felt not like criticism but liberation, because there was no shame or blame, just an exhilarating sense that life is seldom about much more than making honest mistakes. Finally the commander said, "My biggest failure was in Iraq. Got a lot wrong there. Felt a fool for a long time. Funny thing is, it's only since then that I've really enjoyed my job. Maybe it's because I'm no longer obsessed about meeting people's expectations."

If you want to learn how to transcend failure, if you want to discover how to live with your own failures and those of others, without resentment, you need to spend time with people dealing with long term conflict and crisis, with problems that can't just be fixed. One such place is Northern Ireland. One priest in Northern Ireland taught me a lesson I've never forgotten. Reflecting on decades of disappointment and destruction and devastation and failure, he gently said, "It's better to fail in a cause that will finally succeed than to succeed in a cause that will finally fail." Think again about Ruth's words to Naomi, and Peter's words in John's gospel. That's what makes them so powerful. "It's better to fail in a cause that will finally succeed than to succeed in a cause that will finally fail."

Duke class of 2009, you've had four years to enjoy the Gothic Wonderland. You've had some successes, and there are thousands of people here today to celebrate them. And you've had failures, even though some of those are probably known only to yourself. But what I want to say to you is this. When you've succeeded, has it been in a cause that will finally fail? And when you've failed, has it been in a cause that will finally succeed? In the end the quality of your time at Duke University will not be measured by the quantity of your successes or the extent of your achievements or your post-graduation salary or your recognitions or awards or the glorious splendor of your Facebook page. It will come down to this: have you here identified and committed yourself to a cause in the light of which all successes and failures will be evaluated, a cause that will indeed finally succeed because of its truth, because of its beauty, because of its goodness? If not, you'll have no real way of knowing whether anything that lies ahead of you is really success or failure. But if you *have* discovered and embraced such a cause, if you've been claimed in such a way that as you leave this Chapel today you know who you are and whose you are, then you won't be destroyed by failure or ruined by success, because you'll know that any success of yours is just an embellishment to an already breathtaking picture, and no failure of yours can ruin a wondrous story.

Class of 2009, this is my dream for you. That you'll find that cause, or be found by it. That you'll never be dazzled by your own success, but will always be a hospitable place where others can recognize their own needs and fragility and not pretend success is everything or success makes you immortal. And most of all, that you'll let your life begin the day you really, seriously fail, and let that day be the day you discover who you truly are and whether that failure is really in a cause that will finally succeed. My dream for you is that you then become the most powerful people in the world. The most powerful person in the world is the one who isn't paralyzed by the fear of their own failure. My dream is that that person is you.