

## **Framing Failure with Forgiveness**

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### **PRE-LESSON INFORMATION:**

#### **SESSION DESCRIPTION:**

Life and ministry tend to place many demands upon us all. We often feel like failures in one or more areas of our lives. The world seems to frame us with expectations of perfection and success but God's grace frames us with forgiveness. This session will remind you of this truth and give you practical ways to live into that forgiveness and share it with others.

#### **ELCA FAITH PRACTICES:**

*PRAY—confess sin; GIVE—a new beginning*

#### **LEARNING OUTCOMES:**

Participants will . . .

- Talk honestly about the reality of failure and sin—personal, social, interpersonal
- Consider the daily importance of forgiveness in the Lord's Prayer
- Imagine forgiveness as a practice of giving yourself to a new beginning

#### **MATERIALS NEEDED:**

- large paper, sheet, metal, or cardboard
- magnets, paint, or sticky substance
- Bibles
- small paper or notecards
- pens and colored pencils

## GETTING STARTED

*(Note to leaders: This section is optional. You might use it as background knowledge to equip you to lead the lesson, for ideas to use throughout the lesson, or read it as an introduction to the lesson. If read as an introduction, the questions in this section are intended to help participants consider the points being made, and not for discussion.)*

“Failure is not an option.” We’ve heard it before--in advertisements for action movies, in talk about our schools, around committee meeting tables. We’ve heard it, over and over again. And it’s supposed to be a motivator. Here’s the problem: it’s only partly true. If option is a choice, it’s true that we rarely *choose* to fail. The problem with the way the phrase is used is that it makes failure seem avoidable. Failure is framed out of the picture of life.

How do you deal with failure if you have no frame for it, if you think it does not exist?

Frames are often used to focus attention inside a frame. If you’re choosing what to frame and how, you choose the best stuff--the good news, the clean clothes, accomplishments from good days, interactions that bring out your best and make you smile. All this stuff is true, but it’s only part of the story.

*Questions: What’s inside your frame today?*

*Or, which day would you choose to frame to show your best self?*

*What did you have to leave out of the frame to make your best self?*

Frames get smaller and smaller if you don’t include failure. In the effort to preserve what is good in the frame, some things are judged as inadequate and inferior and pushed outside the frame. We get so used to framing our lives--what is acceptable clothing, language, physical behavior, etc.--that we can make snap judgments against everything that does not fit. We judge others and we judge ourselves. We sometimes use the Bible to justify our judgments. If we’re trying to frame our lives biblically, how does the frame work? Does it focus our attention by making an inside and an outside? If so, what or who is in?

We ourselves often do not fit the frames we’ve made or adopted for our lives.

Think for a minute about ***framing a path*** instead of a picture. When you frame a path you try to pay attention to what the journey will be like--how to avoid traps, ascend and descend slowly, where the shade and sun will be. A path guides your steps through different kinds of terrain.

*Question: How does today fit on the path of your journey through this week or year?*

Shifting the story of our best self to a path instead of a picture gives us a chance to include failure in our stories. It’s true that the failure will rarely be a choice, so it might

feel like quicksand, thorns, shadows, a pit. Our experiences of failure are true, but they are not the whole story.

Our story as Christians includes lots of moments when Jesus met with people who seemed like failures. He never said to them, "Failure is not an option." Instead, he said, "Your faith has made you well." As much as we might think that Jesus snapped his fingers and all was accomplished, this faith he's talking about is more like confidence to begin again. There's a word for the ability to begin again: ***forgiveness***.

Forgiveness has a starring role in the Lord's Prayer. For Martin Luther it is the fifth petition and the need for it is daily, just like the need for daily bread. Praying this prayer does not cause God's forgiveness; God has already given it. Rather, praying the prayer is for the humans who pray it:

- 1) a caution to pride and call to humility
- 2) a reminder to forgive others

*Questions: How does it feel to think of forgiveness as a daily activity?*

*What do you need to be forgiven for?*

*For what can you forgive others?*

## **OPENING ACTIVITY: HITTING THE BULLSEYE**

With paint, magnets, or sticky substance take turns trying to hit the center of a target. You're likely to have some competitive folks in the crowd--folks who want to get every shot on target. You're also likely to have some who cannot get anywhere near the target or who get frustrated trying. Have fun doing this exercise and note the dynamics. Then get ready to connect the game to the topic.

Failure was not an option in that game. No one (probably) chose to fail, unless doing so obviously and intentionally was meant to cover up for inadequacy. Someone might have shone brightly in that activity--a best self emerged. Others might have failed miserably at trying to hit the target.

### **DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:**

- How did it feel to succeed? How did it feel to fail?
- Are there times you feel success or failure in things you do--school, sports, friendship?
- Can you think of ways others succeed or fail with you?
- What do you do when you feel like you've failed or someone else has failed you?

## **BIBLE STUDY**

(Use all 3 or choose 1 that speaks to your group)

### *Note to Leaders:*

The passages below are intended to open up honest discussion about failure. They use the language of sin, right, good, and evil, and they try to imagine God's role in helping humans navigate through difficult experiences. In each of them the frame of path works much better than the frame of picture. Scan through them so you can decide whether to focus on personal failure, interpersonal or relationship failure, or social failure.

Try to get your group talking about these issues:

- What does failure look like?
- How is failure acknowledged?
- What is the path forward?

### **PERSONAL FAILURE AND FORGIVENESS**

Romans 7.15-25: "What I want to do I do not do"

Romans 8.1-2 and 35-39: "Through Christ Jesus the law of the Spirit of life set me free"

- What does failure look like?
- How is failure acknowledged?
- What is the path forward?

"Failure is not an option." In Romans 7.15-25 Paul writes about messing up--failing and sinning--even when he didn't want to, when he didn't choose to. "I do not understand my own actions," he writes in verse 15.

### **Questions:**

- How does Paul describe good, right, evil, and sin?
- Do you ever feel what he feels, that sin dwells in you (v. 20)?
- Do you ever feel that your actions are beyond your control? What do you do?

In Romans 7.25 and again in 8.1-2 and 35-39 Paul credits Christ with setting him free and loving him.

### **Questions:**

- When, where, and how do you experience Christ?
- Do you feel set free? What does Christ free you from?
- Do you feel loved?
- How do you respond to these experiences?

## **INTERPERSONAL FAILURE AND FORGIVENESS**

Matthew 5.(18) 23-24: “First, go and be reconciled...and then leave your gift at the altar”

- What does failure look like?
- How is failure acknowledged?
- What is the path forward?

Jesus teaches for a solid three chapters in Matthew 5-7 (“The Sermon on the Mount”). Right after the Beatitudes Jesus teaches about the law and makes sure his hearers know that the point of following God is not to get all the rules right but to treat people right. In verses 23 and 24 he instructs people postpone bringing gifts to the altar if they have a disagreement with someone.

### **Questions:**

- Can you praise God if you’re fighting with a friend? What does it feel like?
- Do you think your friendships have anything to do with God?

## **SOCIAL FAILURE AND FORGIVENESS**

Nehemiah 5.1-13: “What you are doing is not good...Give back to them immediately what you have taken from them”

- What does failure look like?
- How is failure acknowledged?
- What is the path forward?

Failure sometimes starts in desperate circumstances--homes are destroyed, money is lost, disaster causes a limited supply of food or water. When disaster happens people focus on their own survival and often neglect others. Nehemiah was a prophet during a time of disaster for the Jews. Because of famine people were giving up their houses and family farms. They were borrowing money and even selling themselves or their children into slavery (vv. 1-5). When Nehemiah responds in verses 6-13 he calls out the ways Jews are failing their own people and he reminds them of their covenant with God.

### **Questions:**

- What are Nehemiah’s complaints? What are his solutions?
- How does he remind people of their covenant with God? Is he right to do so?
- Have there been disasters in your neighborhood or nation?
- How do people respond?
- Do people make God part of the story? How? Are they right to do so?

## VIDEO ON FAILURE AND FORGIVENESS

Play the DVD segment with Colleen, or use the text in the appendix.

## THE LORD'S PRAYER: DAILY PRACTICES

Look at the text of the Lord's Prayer in Matthew 6: 9-15 and read it line by line. (Each line is called a petition.)

### **Questions:**

- What do you notice about the prayer by reading slowly, one line at a time?
- According to the prayer, how does forgiveness work? What do you think about this?
- How often do you think forgiveness should be practiced?
- Is the prayer about changing God?
- What does the prayer understand human needs?
- What parts of life does the prayer cover?

Use ideas from "Getting Started" to help the conversation along and begin to make a connection between forgiveness and failure.

## CLOSING ACTIVITIES: OWNING UP TO MISSING THE MARK

Below are two ways you can give yourself as a gift. You can give the promise to start again. What other ways can you think of?

### **1) Write a note to someone:**

- acknowledge pain or failure in your relationship and
- express your commitment to begin again

Give it to them or place it in a special place where you can pray about the relationship. Put it on a shelf (a small altar area in your room), in a prayer box, on your mirror, in your notebook.

### **2) Commit a tough relationship to prayer and picture the person's face when you pray the Lord's Prayer.**

## **APPENDIX: Video on Failure and Forgiveness** *(partial script below)*

“Hypocrite.” It’s an accusation many Christians have heard in response to an invitation to join in Christian activity. The complaint is that Christians say and proclaim one thing in worship and live very differently. Yep. Christians mess up, just like everybody else.

Confessing failure is not always our first response. It’s not a surprise when our culture is filled with messages like “Failure is not an option” and “Some things are too big to fail.” Our social context is not adept at navigating through the cycles of failure and forgiveness. Failure is treated as total disgrace, from which there is no authentic recovery. Careers are ruined and names are besmirched; the fallen famous appear on tabloids for weeks.

Because we don’t know how to deal with failure we have a hard time admitting it. There is pressure to avoid failure and spin difficult situations into some good. If failure must be acknowledged we often blame or punish, as though it is not possible to fail and any failure is the work of one bad apple.

Worry about failure keeps us from voicing our deepest values, reaching out to others who are different, and acting on core convictions in risky ways. Sometimes it’s blame. Other times it’s an excuse. Still other times it’s a retreat into bland niceness. We pretend that nothing is wrong, nobody has disappointed anybody, and everybody tries their best. And if you can’t say it out loud, you might take it out on yourself—cutting, drinking, doing things to take away the fail feeling.

In short, we’re afraid to fail and worse still, we think it possible not to fail. In this context there is little space to confess our shortcomings and brokenness—aspects of our experience that are often all too real to us.

Here’s where hypocrites have a chance: Jesus said, “I have come to call not the righteous but sinners” (Matthew 9.13). Jesus spent time with people whose lives looked like failure from the outside. He ate with them, called them by name, proclaimed them well, praised their faith.

He ***forgave*** them, which gave them a chance to begin again.

In *The Human Condition* Hannah Arendt expresses the importance of forgiveness: “Without being forgiven, released from the consequences of what we have done, our capacity to act would, as it were, be confined to one single deed from which we could never recover; we would remain the victims of its consequences forever.” Her point is that, left untouched, failure can become an all-consuming story. When we fail, individually or together, the consequences can go on for a long time. So can the responses of blame and punishment.

Arendt says that forgiveness “releases” a person from consequences. She doesn’t mean that consequences can be erased. She means that forgiveness is a gift to someone that says something like, “You’ll be capable of something good again. You can do and say things of value. You can contribute. You are still part of the community.” To her forgiveness is the essential ingredient in life with other people--whether in a family, group, or nation. Forgiveness is what saves people from ruining themselves and their relationships.

Arendt’s inspiration for the discussion of forgiveness is Jesus, who practiced forgiveness not only with words but also through the reconciliation of relationships. He started by expressing the reality of failure. He encouraged people to rejoin community. AND he taught that forgiveness is the work of humans as much as it is the work of God.

In one way, the Lord’s Prayer even makes it seem like God’s forgiveness of us is directly related to our forgiveness of others:

“And forgive us our debts,  
as we also have forgiven our debtors” (Matthew 6.12).

Jesus never pretended that failure did not happen and he never said that failure was preferable to success. He didn’t put much energy into blaming, ignoring, punishing, or making nice. His actions interrupted all of those responses by treating people as people, worthy of being looked at, talked to, eaten with. He let them begin again, without their failure taking up center stage.

Forgiveness reframes failure by acknowledging it and giving a new beginning

“Forgiving...is the only reaction which does not merely re-act but acts anew and unexpectedly, unconditioned by the act which provoked it and therefore freeing from its consequences both the one who forgives and the one who is forgiven.”

--Hannah Arendt



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