

St. Paul's Lutheran Church Muskego, WI

4th Sunday After Pentecost -- June 16, 17, 20, 2018

Judges 16:21-31

SAMSON—FAILING FORWARD TO THE GLORY OF THE LORD

Happy Fathers' Day! Dads, please raise your hands. Let's give our dads a round of applause for their ongoing work.

Dad, would you qualify for "Father of the Year"? If we brought your kids, their mom, your friends forward, would they vouch for your virtue as a dad? Would we pass the background check for "Father of the Year"?

Let's broaden the guilt—I mean, our reach--here today. Would any of us pass the background check to be "Person of the Year" -- a saint? Now, hold on! You DO know the types of questions that would be asked, correct?

- *Do you love others more than yourself?*
- *Do you lead in life with humility, and humility only?*
- *Have you ever judged your neighbor WITHOUT knowing facts?*
- *Have you ever caught an error in your favor on a store receipt and NOT returned the money?*
- *Have you ever desired someone NOT your spouse?*
- *Do you hate even the SIGHT of a certain person?*
- *Do you call yourself a Christian but then let the words from your mouth call that label into question?*

"Pat", was certain she was no saint! In fact, she had stopped coming to church years before because of her sin! I would smile at her as we would talk about Jesus--she knew him—and I would say, "You know that you are forgiven, a saint in Jesus, don't you? The Father says so."

"Oh, Pastor Strobel," she would say. "That's easy for you to say because you aren't God! You don't know what you are dealing with in me. I am a failure at this Christian thing."

Pat was not buying it that God was good at helping his children fail forward—not helping them TO fail, but **HELPING THEM TO FAIL FORWARD TO THE GLORY OF HIS NAME!**

1. No One Sets Out to Be a Failure

Do you consider yourself a success at life, or a failure? Our worship folder states that a person's greatest fear is failure. Is that true for you? Is *FAILURE* your biggest fear?

Do you remember the optimism of your youth? Your dreams? Your plans? You were probably asked, “What do you want to be when you grow up?” How does that compare with the reality?

- **“A doctor! I want to be a doctor.”** Or did upper level math pop that balloon?
- **“I want to own my own restaurant.”** But a line cook is all you’ve ever been?
- **“I just want to bust out of Muskego!”** But you never left the small town and the “big city” growing our way still isn’t big enough for you?

Do you remember your high school graduation slogan that went something like this: **“You’re off to great places! Today is your day! Your mountain is waiting so get on your way!”** Does that sound today more like a Dr. Seuss book than reality? Are you on the mountain?

- **“Married with a white picket fence! That’s part of the dream!”** But you ignored the Creator’s voice and went into marriage to GET rather than to GIVE...and life is more of a battle than a beautiful journey?
- **“A parent...a dad...that’s what I’ll be!”** But you took too long to stop being a kid yourself and you lost the window of opportunity to invest in your kids...to win their love...and that window is now closed?
- **“A Christian I will always be!”** Did you ever promise that? “Oh, pastor, you don’t know what God is dealing with in me.”

In theory, no one sets out to fail. But do we have those days, those moments, when failure seems written on our foreheads? The dream was in “ME”, the hope was in “ME”, strength and confidence came from “ME” – “and here I am in this prison with eyes that cannot see a future and options bound in bronze shackles! I AM Samson!”

Samson had failed! 20 years leading Israel and freeing them from bondage to the Philistines...but to the glory to Samson! Pastor Pete reminded us the last two weeks through our focus on Samson of the dangers of self-reliance for strength and of charting a sinful path--the foolishness of taking small steps away from the Savior to a big destruction! The “bleck!” of womanizing and the foolishness of ME!

Samson had been a Nazirite from birth! Dedicated to the LORD God of Israel! No razor to his head so that his seven braids decades in the making would make it obvious whose he was! No fermented drink so that he would think and act clearly for his God. No being near dead bodies so that he would be all about the life God alone gives! And, in Samson’s case, superhuman strength to be used to God’s glory.

In theory, no one sets out to fail, but fail Samson did. *Seduced* by a woman who did not know the LORD, *nagged* into revealing the source of his strength in his hair, *subdued* by her request due to his arrogance. His strength was NOT truly in his hair but in the promise of God attached to the hair. And when his faith lost its sight, and so did his eyes!

But, my friends, the LORD God of Israel is NOT a failure—and he does not fail us! When he makes a promise, he keeps it! And so Samson’s hair began to grow in that prison. The promise

of God tickled the flickering faith of God's man! As Samson felt the stubble grow, he must have asked, "LORD God, can it be again?"

The LORD God of Israel is no failure and he burned with anger as the Philistines scoffed at his Name, the LORD—the Name that means "I AM!" The Philistines' false god, Dagon, was only stone carved by man. He was NOT...and therefore he gave NO strength and NO hope! Samson fell because of his sin against the LORD and NOT because of a false god!

So when the I AM God heard the Philistines say, "Our god has delivered Samson into our hands," and the Philistines praised their god, the LORD God of Israel had to set the record straight, for the good of all mankind! ***"I AM the LORD, and there is no other; apart from me there is no god. I will show the holiness of my great name, which has been profaned among the nations. The nations will know that I am the LORD when I am proved holy through you before their eyes."***

No one sets out to fail, but when we do and when we are weak, always remember that our God is faithful and he is strong and he is no failure! So Samson's hair grew and it grew...until the LORD's time had come.

2. ...But Grace Surprises Us All!

What is most surprising to you in the story of Samson—the ***power*** of God *IN* Samson or the ***grace*** God *FOR* Samson? The hair on most of our heads grows daily—by the power of God—that is true yet does not surprise us. The God who parted the Red Sea and who brought water out of solid rock certainly could attach superhuman strength to the length of even YOUR hair if he chose. But to allow Samson to rise from the ashes of his shame and his defeat and his "bleck!" and to shine again for the LORD his God? THAT is extraordinary! To forgive...THAT my friends is GRACE! Love undeserved.

Isn't it exceptional that in our lives, too, God's grace is extraordinary? We would all agree that Samson on his own could not pass the background check to be "Person of the Year". But I believe we began our time together today acknowledging the same truth about ourselves! *The Story of Nathan Strobel* for all God's people to see would NOT be a pretty sight! So how is it that we sit here in God's presence today as those we are someone worthy?! The Apostle Paul tells us:

As surely as God is faithful, our message to you is not "Yes" and "No." (a wishy-washy thing) For the Son of God, Jesus Christ, who was preached among you was not "Yes" and "No," but in him it has always been "Yes." For no matter how many promises God has made, they are "Yes" in Christ.

And what is the promise of God? ***"I will forgive their wickedness and will remember their sins no more."***

And the I AM God doesn't change! He made a promise connected to Samson's hair and he made a promise connected to you and to me and to Samson! The Messiah, Jesus, would come in the flesh to shoulder our sin and our guilt and the "bleck!" He would die for it to forgive us our

sin and to free us from sin's shackles—to strengthen us in our weakness and shame and guilt! He planned to turn our eyes back to heaven and to restore to us sight and hope that the world can never gouge out!

And so Samson prayed to the LORD, *“Sovereign LORD, remember me. Please, God, strengthen me just once more, and let me with one blow get revenge for my two eyes.”*

Service to God flows from his forgiveness--his grace upon us and his mercy to us! The writer to the Hebrews calls Samson a man of faith who conquered kingdoms by his faith and NOT by his hair or even his strength. The LORD God of Israel answered Samson's prayer! The LORD God of Israel upheld his promise! With the hair had grown the faith, and the Spirit of God strengthened his man for his task—to bring glory to the LORD who does NOT have patience for a lifeless god of stone!

So bracing himself against the pillars on which the temple stood, his right hand on the one and his left hand on the other, Samson said, “Let me die with the Philistines!” Then he pushed with all his might, and down came the temple on the rulers and on all the people in it.

God's grace surprises, doesn't it? Was Samson more worthy of God's love than these Philistines? WHY does God do it? Why does he save us? Grace. Undeserved loved. In Jesus God declares this concerning us who believe: *“But you are a chosen people, a royal priesthood, a holy nation, God's special possession, that you may declare the praises of him who called you out of darkness into his wonderful light. Once you were not a people, but now you are the people of God; once you had not received mercy, but now you have received mercy.”*

God's grace continues to AMAZE. WE are saints of God! Forget “Father of the Year”! WE are saints of God! God's funny that way! Making us—and calling us--what we are not!

CONCLUSION **FAILING FORWARD TO THE GLORY OF THE LORD** is our worship theme. **“Failing”** is what we so often do. **“Forward”** is what God accomplished in his Son to save us from sin. **“To the glory of God”** comes in our witness to our world—shining not in perfection but in forgiveness.

Believe it or not, you are saint—failing forward in Jesus! Forgiven.

My friend, “Pat”? Today I hear she is right there with us! Eyes that see. Faith that trusts. A heart of joy! Failing forward. To God's glory! Amen.

Prepared by Pastor Nate Strobel
414-422-0320, ext. 293
nstrobel@stpaulmuskego.org