

Will We Co-Create Second Chances?

People of God's Spirit – all of us sourced by fathomless love – on this fourth Sunday in Lent, we offer each other the unquantifiable gift of our presence with one another as we individually and collectively seek to sense the Spirit calling us toward our next faithful steps. As we move further along our Lenten journey today, I invite you to wonder with me, **will we co-create second chances?** Please pray with me:

Creating, revealing, and sustaining God; guide us in our quest to follow the way of Jesus. With the Psalmist, we long to trust that your steadfast love surrounds us. Increase our awareness of your deep love and deep peace accompanying us at all times. As you work within and among us, O God, grant us the serenity to accept the things that are not within our power to change, the courage to change the things we can, and the wisdom to know the difference. Amen.

Friends old and new, at the heart of today's question (will we co-create second chances?), other questions await us:

- How will we collaborate with the love of God and with other people to co-create second chances?
- What will the creative work require of us?

With gentle curiosity, let's notice those questions about potential next steps and forward movement in our lives, and let's place them nearby as we take a moment to look closely at the concept of second chances. As many of you know, I enjoy visiting with Merriam Webster dictionary in my sermon preparations. I do not recall ever before having a word or phrase search render a single meaning. A second chance is, quite plainly, *"an opportunity to try something again after failing one time."*

Failure is a concept and experience that carries significant weight in many of our lives. I think that failure can have greater and lesser degrees of gravity in a person's life based both on the nature of the particular experience of failure and based on internal and external messages about the value of failure and the value of success. Failure is defined in three ways: "*omission of occurrence or performance, lack of success, falling short.*" Failure can be "*omission of occurrence or performance, lack of success, falling short.*" So failure is about desired actions not happening. If you take just one thing away from this sermon today, I hope it will be that failure is about activity, not character. I see two reasons why we experience widespread aversion, fear and even shame related to failure: capitalism and distortion.

In a society that places a high value on success in the forms of material wealth and prestige, we are enculturated to idolize success and perhaps to idolize our aspirations for our own successes (particularly in our professional and economic pursuits, though also in our relationships). Experiences of failure threaten our idolatry of success in a capitalistic society. In turn, our idolatry of success promotes our aversion, fear and shame related to failures.

I also think our widespread aversion, fear and shame related to failure are promoted by a distorted understanding of the purpose of failure in our lives. We have often judged failures by ourselves and others as evidence of character flaws. But failure is not about character. It is very specifically about activity or actions. My failures may offer insights into my character as one of many influences on my behavior, but my failures do not mirror my character. And the same is true for all of us.

I encourage us to wonder today - how we can resist the influence of capitalism and distortion on how we process our experiences of failure.

In contrast, I do think our experiences of second chances can reveal more about our character. Engaging in a second chance requires a conscious choice; and that conscious choice often requires humility, grace and active love.

Keeping in mind the singular definition of a second chance as “*an opportunity to try something again after failing one time,*” in what context, in what circumstances, have you witnessed someone engaging in a second chance? In what context or circumstances have you engaged in a second chance?

I may be speaking out of both sides of my mouth, but I would like to exercise a bit of liberty, purposefully massaging the meaning of a second chance. I think it can also be an opportunity to try something new or to try something again – but in a new way – after failing one time. I would like to tell you about an establishment, an institution, a wonderful organization in the small town of La Grange, Texas where I lived from 2005 through 2008. The Second Chance Emporium is a thrift store, organized by seven of our local faith communities. It is run primarily on volunteer time, gathering in and organizing donated items during the week and then opening the emporium on Fridays and Saturdays for people to come and purchase items.

I believe that the core of the mission of the Second Chance Emporium is to believe that a resource could take on new life or could take on a second life. And the failure was ok. The item was no longer performing in its previous context. It was no longer successfully used in its previous context. It was falling short of being useful in its previous context. And so second chances at the Second Chance Emporium has everything to do with believing there can be new life when people and resources are given second chances.

Let us hear a bit of our gospel reading one more time, with ideas of grace and space for failure and openness to second chances in mind and heart. We heard, “*Coming to his senses at last, he said, ‘How many hired hands at my father’s house have more than enough to eat, while here I am starving! I’ll quit and go back home and say, ‘I’ve sinned against God and against you; I no longer deserve to be called one of your children. Treat me like one of your hired hands.’” With that, the younger son set off for home. While still a long way off, the father caught sight of the returning child and was deeply moved. The father ran out to meet him, threw his arms around him and kissed him.*”

And later the father interacted with his older son: *“‘But my child!’ the father said. ‘You’re with me always, and everything I have is yours. But we have to celebrate and rejoice! This brother of yours was dead and has come back to life. He was lost and now he’s found.’”*

I invite us to look at the cover art of our worship bulletin for this morning. Our talented Communications Coordinator Kimberly and I were delighted to land upon this image for today. I invite you to consider what you read in this image of embrace between parent and adult child. What do you read through scripture and in the image in the father’s face and body language? What do you imagine in the face of the adult child? Second chances are huge. Second chances are powerful. Second chances require mutuality and trust, hope, grace, immense courage. (And thank you to Mark for sharing the image with those who are with us via live stream.)

Author and artist Emily McDowell became famous in the past decade for her line of greeting cards called empathy cards. She also co-authored with empathy expert Dr. Kelsey Crowe this book. A clergy colleague recommended this book to me sometime during pandemic. It’s entitled *There Is No Good Card for This: What to Say and Do When Life is Scary, Awful, and Unfair to People You Love*. I have riffled through it and definitely recommend it to others. It is an extremely pragmatic book for considering how to respond when our loved ones experience “scary, awful, and unfair” situations.

My colleague Kimberly came across a quote by Emily McDowell and shared it on our public Facebook page and in our electronic communications this week. I want to read it to you as a sort of blessing for approaching failure and second chances. McDowell writes, *“‘Finding yourself’ is not really how it works. You aren’t a ten-dollar bill in last winter’s coat pocket. You are also not lost. Your true self is right there, buried under cultural conditioning, other people’s opinions, and inaccurate conclusions you drew as a kid that became your beliefs about who you are. ‘Finding yourself’ is actually returning to yourself.*

An unlearning, an excavation, a remembering who you were before the world got its hands on you.” Those are words from Emily McDowell.

In a moment, in our prayer hymn entitled “Hosea,” we will sing together these words about being remembered and remembering ourselves – from the voice of God: *“Long have I waited for your coming home to me and living deeply our new life.”*

Remember, friends, failure is not necessarily evidence of lack of character. Failures give us opportunity to rediscover, relearn, remember our core values and to appreciate who we really are, each a unique child of God, manifesting God’s love. Let us embrace both failure and its possible fruit of second chance. Let us live in new ways. Love is counting on us. Amen.

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Psalm 32, Luke 15:1-3,11-32