

My grandfather grew up in a very rural part of Sicily, no running water, no toilets. If you wanted to move quickly, riding a donkey was the state of the art. As a young man he emigrated to New York and with his 3rd grade education and successfully ran a neighborhood tavern. He worked hard to provide for his family and was able to sell the business in his 50's and spend more time with his family. He lived the American dream.

There was one thing in life that he failed at. He wanted to learn how to drive but made an error in judgement and nearly had a serious accident. That was it! He gave up his plans for driving. He did not want to risk taking the life of another human being. And living in a city, he did not have access to donkeys like he had known in Sicily. He learned to rely on others to get around, but he never learned how to drive a car. Sometimes fear can hold us back.

In Paul's letter to the Romans, his heart is filled with anguish. With God's help in his life, he made a great leap of faith. The zealous persecutor of Christians became a fearless apostle, unafraid of anything. He was willing to endure beatings, rejection, and imprisonment all for the sake of the Gospel. But his heart was troubled. A significant number of his Jewish brothers and sisters did not take that same leap of faith. Christianity had great success with the Gentiles but in contrast, relatively few Jews became Christians.

The Israelites were the chosen ones. They were given the law, and the covenant, and the patriarchs and the prophets. All of their history was designed to help them recognize and follow the Messiah. How could the divine plan be frustrated by Israel's unbelief? Israel feared losing what they had, and so never quite made that leap (Notes to Romans 9). Paul would willingly undergo any hardship for the sake of their coming to a deep and abiding knowledge and love of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. But this was not to be. Sometimes fear can hold us back in life.

Fear is also present in the Gospel. Although they were being tossed about by the waves and the wind, the Apostles in the boat are not afraid of drowning. They see Jesus walking on the water, and they cried out in fear. He is more powerful than the forces of nature and that is terrifying to them. Jesus responds, "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid."

Peter takes a small leap of faith, but his faith is too weak. He cannot walk on water alone and he sinks. He cries out, "Lord, save me!" When Peter fails, he places all of his trust in Jesus. Jesus stretches out his hand and catches Peter.

How many times have you let fear hold you back? Fear can paralyze us. My grandfather never learned to drive for fear of harming someone else. Much to the anguish of Paul, many of the Israelites feared to let go of the Law. We need not fear failure, it can be a great teacher. Many things in life are more powerful than we can cope with. Nothing is more powerful than God. In fear, we may try to hold onto a safety net. And holding on too tightly, we may miss the opportunity to grow. We need to let go and let God stretch his hand out to catch us.

When Jesus was arrested, Peter failed three times, denying Christ repeatedly before the cock crowed. On the cross, Jesus stretches his arms again. This time, he is not simply catching Peter, he is stretching out his arms for every sinner. When we fail, when we fall into the deep abyss of sin, Jesus is the calm in the storm of our life. He calls us to get out of the boat and come to him. "Take courage, it is I; do not be afraid" (Mt 14:27).

And should our faith fail, should we sink even further, Jesus is listening for us to cry out like Peter, "Lord, save me." Fearing failure, we may hold onto our sin. When we accept failure as a steppingstone, then great growth is possible. The light of Christ can pierce the darkest corner of our lives, and like Saint Paul ... God can transform our greatest failure in life to become our greatest strength.

When I was the pastor of Saint Nicholas, Narcotics Anonymous used to meet in the basement of the church weekly. One Sunday evening, I noticed a few people going upstairs into the church to pray and I asked what happened. One of the elders of the group had died. I don't remember his name, but for the sake of the story let's call him Steve.

The following week, I invited everyone up to the church. I said a few prayers and others shared their memories. I was amazed. Each person recounted a story. When they were sinking and needed someone to reach out to them, Steve offered that lifeline through his own powerful conversion by the grace of God. All of this was possible because Steve had failed. When that happened, he reached out to a Higher Power. "Lord, save me." And Jesus stretched out his hand and caught him.