

21 August 2003
Funeral Sermon for Nelson Meadows

St. Athanasius Lutheran Church
Vienna, VA

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“Hope for Failures”

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

Dear friends, and especially Lillian, April, Nelson, and Cynthia:

There was a book and a movie that came out a few years ago named Tuesdays with Morrie – about a man who spent every Tuesday afternoon with his old dying friend named Morrie, talking and learning about life. Well, I had Thursdays with Nelson! Because it seemed like it was mostly (but not always!) on Thursdays that I had the chance to go over and visit with my old, dying friend, Nelson. And we talked about all sorts of things, and it was one of those things that we talked about that I want to share with all of you today.

It was the day that Nelson told me he felt like a failure. Because all his life, he had been strong and proud and had taken care of others. He took care of his friends. He took care of his family. He took care of others in the army by driving an ambulance. He always went out of his way to do what he could. And he did his best. He maybe wasn't the smartest man in the world, or the richest, or the strongest – but he did okay, he said. He gave his family and friends all he could. . . . But now – now, he couldn't. He couldn't do anything. All he could do is sit in his chair, or lie on his bed. He had to rely on others to do for him. And while his family and friends were more than happy to give back to him all the love and care he had given to them for so many years, to a strong and proud man of 83 years, it was very hard being on the receiving end. Receiving when he had been the giver and the provider for so many years. And because of that, he felt like a burden, like a failure. He couldn't provide for his family when they needed him the most, he said.

Now, I'm sure all of us would disagree with Nelson – he most certainly wasn't a failure, right? He provided for his family well! He raised three beautiful children, and loved his grandchildren dearly! There should be more husbands and fathers like Nelson, right? In this world of adultery, abandonment, abuse, unfaithfulness, and selfishness, there should be more men like Nelson. And many of you told him that. . . . But he wouldn't believe it. Still, he felt himself a failure.

But you see, Nelson was realizing what we all must finally – at some point and time or another in our lives – realize: we are not self-sufficient; we are failures. For in the end, we will all fail. We will all fail at life. And the proof of that fact, that failure, is the fact that we're all going to die. And no matter how successful you may be, no matter how powerful, no matter how wealthy, no matter how popular, no matter how looked up to at work, or in the community – in the end, you are going to fail at life, and die. Sometimes it takes an awful big wallop – like cancer, or some other tragedy – to get us to realize and admit that! But Nelson finally did see it. By earthly standards, he may not have been a failure. But now that his earthly life was about to end . . . what now?

And so on that Thursday with Nelson, I had the chance to tell Nelson what I am also going to tell all of you on this Thursday afternoon: **we are failures! It is true!** All of us. Failures at life. It is as we heard from the Scriptures, ***“for all have sinned and fall short of the glory of God.”*** We are sinners through and through and the wages of sin is death. And if it were up to us to succeed at life none of us would because we're all going to die and fail at life; fail at living. . . .

And yet, I told Nelson, there is hope! Because there was One who did not fail at life. One who came and entered our world and our failed life and died with us, **but who then rose back to life** – the Son of God become man, our Saviour Jesus Christ. He was the only One who did not fail, who did not sin, but was perfect in every way. And when He died it was not because of His own sin, but to pay the price for our sin, and for the sole purpose that by going through death to life Himself, He could then bring us through death to life with Him. So that we could have hope. And He promised that for all who believe in Him, *He would do exactly that.* For all who believe and are baptized are joined with Him in His death and resurrection, so that death is then just the gate to everlasting life.

This is what we heard earlier again from the Scriptures: ***“If in this life only we have hoped in Christ, we are of all people most to be pitied. But in fact Christ has been raised from the dead, the firstfruits of those who have fallen asleep. For as by a man came death, by a man has come also the resurrection of the dead. For as in Adam all die, so also in Christ shall all be made alive.”*** For Jesus Christ did not come for those who could save themselves – He came to rescue us failures; all of us, who cannot save ourselves. Although we will all die, our *failure* need not be the final word. Our Saviour gave His life to death on a cross, He suffered, bled, and died to restore and give back life to the world – to give life to us, that we may live forever.

Nelson listened to that. He thought a lot about it. He knew what a failure he was. I told him what a failure I was. We talked about the Church, which is not a group of people

who are good and successful, but a gathering of failures, clinging to their Saviour for hope, for forgiveness, and for life. . . . Nelson thought about that. He hadn't really been raised in the Church, he wasn't much of a church-going man, and so it all sounded too good to be true! Would God really want an old man like him, who couldn't do anything anymore?

And what about you? Why should God want you? Because you are so good? Because you are so successful? Because you can give something to Him, or do something for Him? No, He doesn't need you. . . . **But He loves you.** And He wants to give you life. He wants to forgive your sins. He wants to give you the gift of faith. He wants to make you His child. He wants to feed you with His Word and Sacrament. He wants to be your Father and give you all that you need. He wants you to know that even though you are a failure, and a sinner, and a person not worthy to be even a servant of His, let alone His child, His love and life is greater than all of that. And so in His great mercy and grace, through faith in His Son, our Saviour Jesus Christ, God gives His forgiveness and life . . . and He wants to give it to you, to me, even to old, cancer-ridden men like Nelson. ***“For God so loved the world, that He gave His only Son, that whoever believe in Him should not perish but have eternal life.”***

I didn't see Nelson for too many Thursdays after that day. There were one or two, and then I went on vacation and Nelson didn't make it through those two weeks that I was away. I told Nelson that I would send him a postcard from one of the old California Missions that I was going to visit. I visited it the day before he died, and – failure that I am! – I never got the postcard sent. Turns out it didn't matter anyway. But it was a picture of the old church at the mission of San Juan Capistrano – or, should I say, what's left of it. You see, the big old stone church was destroyed by an earthquake only 10 years after it was built. Now there are only ruins. . . . And as I sat down to write this sermon, I thought how appropriate . . . for that is what our lives really are – failures, ruins. Perhaps for a while we are big and impressive and successful, but in the end, as Nelson knew, is failure, is death.

But in Christ there is hope – hope that is found nowhere else. In Christ, failure does not have the final word, life does! And the day is coming when our ruins, our bodies, will be raised to life again! And all with faith in Christ, all who are found in Him who conquered death, will live. I pray that Nelson believed that good news in the end, and I pray it for all of you as well. It is our only hope and comfort. In the end it is all that we have. It is as we sang in the opening hymn,

“With might of ours can naught be done, soon were our loss effected;
But for us fights the Valiant One, whom God Himself elected.

Ask ye, who is this? Jesus Christ it is!

Tho' devils all the world should fill, all eager to devour us,
We tremble not, we fear no ill, they shall not overpow'r us.

And take they our life, goods, fame, child, and wife,
Let these all be gone, they yet have nothing won;
The Kingdom ours remaineth."

In Christ, there is hope for failures! May this faith and trust be in your heart, now and always.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.