

From fear to faith

Making a Difference: Courage to step out



BY AMY WHIKEHART | awhikehart@secc.org

I have only been skiing once in my life. When I lived in Colorado, I figured it was worth trying. It's hard to find people that *don't* ski out West. Unless I faced my fears of traveling down a mountain on two thin pieces of plastic and steel, I would have sat at home alone during the winter weekends.

But I failed miserably at it all. I couldn't stop, I couldn't stay standing up ... and I even had trouble getting off the ski lift. I resorted to staying on the be-

ginner's "hill" with the "magic carpet" conveyor belt in the middle of it. Most of the occupants were half my height, and yet they were still more successful at not crashing into fellow skiers than I was.

It doesn't matter how many lessons friends offer me, or how many "easy" slopes I can practice on. I will never go skiing again. There is something in my human nature that does not wish to repeat failure, and skiing is something that, in my mind, I failed at.

The truth is, I am guilty of refusing to devote time to something unless I know I can succeed. Skiing is a rather trivial example when compared to the things about which God calls us to take risks.

As I read the story about Peter walking on the water in Matt. 14, I began to admire Peter's courage to try something at which he could have failed. Some may even say that he did fail when the winds came, and his focus shifted from faith to fear.

While the other disciples may easily have labeled Peter as a "failure," they would have failed to acknowledge a simple truth: they were still in the boat. While Peter took a step of faith, they stood still. And in Peter's willingness to fail, a deeply profound spiritual lesson can be seen.

As Christians, our lives are about imitating Christ. But we will always fall short of this. Just as Peter desired to follow Christ's example by walking on the water,

we are compelled to draw near to God to be like Him. But our sinful nature always will keep us from fully succeeding in this, as long as we live on this earth.

From a worldly perspective, this has to seem odd. Why would a person devote his life to something he never can fully accomplish? Maybe it's because our worldly definitions of "success" and "failure" are much different than what God has to say on the whole matter.

Micah 6:8: "...What does the Lord require of you? To act justly and to love mercy and to walk humbly with your God."

Psalm 51:17: "The sacrifices of God are a broken spirit; a broken and contrite heart."

In these two passages above, and in the life of Peter, we see that God is asking us to approach our lives with humility. I love this quote by Mother Teresa that sums up exactly what humility looks like:

"If you are humble, nothing will touch you, neither praise nor disgrace, because you know what you are. If you are blamed, you will not be discouraged. If they call you a saint, you will not put yourself on a pedestal."

As Christians, we know what we are. We are beloved children of the Most High God, disciples of Jesus Christ, created by Him for His glory. We don't credit ourselves with success, and we don't resort to despair over our failures. The worth of what we spend our lives on is not based on how much we gain. Rather it's about listening to the voice of God, and learning to be more like Christ with everything we do. And Peter did exactly that when he stepped out of the boat.

DEVOTION: MAKING A DIFFERENCE

DISCUSSION QUESTIONS:

Come up with a one-sentence definition of "success," "failure" and/or "risk," by the world's standards.

- How does this differ from the biblical worldview?
- What are the consequences of the world's definitions?
- What are the freedoms found in God's definitions?
- What risk is God calling you to take today? This week? Month? Year?
- How can you prepare yourself to listen to the voice of God and learn to imitate Christ through these events?
- Are there any failures that you need to "release" and offer up to God to move closer to Him?
- Are there any successes that you are attributing to yourself, rather than giving the glory to God?

Group killers

Have you ever been involved with a group that failed; or one that simply stopped meeting far sooner than you expected? Why do you suppose your group experience ended so abruptly? Though the reasons for a breaking up can be varied, let me suggest five common causes for the dissipation of community.

The Do-It-Alls. Oftentime, group leaders feel that the entire weight of their group success lies squarely on their shoulders. These leaders end up hosting the Bible study in their homes, which need cleaning, and preparing lessons that require time and effort. They also bring snacks every week that cost even more money and time. Such over-burdened leaders inevitably produce the ice-breakers, social events, prayer times, discipleship opportunities and care and counseling needs for all of their group members. No one can keep such a pace. Learn to say "no" and share the responsibilities for your group!

The Task-Masters. Some groups end because the leader is overly concerned with finishing the curriculum and filling in every blank and less concerned about the people around the circle. Leaders

would do well to remember that the people in their groups always are more important than the lesson they have prepared.

The Shallow-Swimmers. Many groups never move beyond the intimacy level of ice-breakers and easy questions. Intimacy and connection are borne out of shared adversity. Groups should be encouraged not to avoid the tough questions of life and remember that prayer is always an appropriate response.

The Ad-Libbers. Group members will be troubled to know if their leader is not prepared week in and week out. As a leader, remember that the time you invest in preparation will reap a more positive experience for your group.

The Inwardly-Focused. The number one group-killer is the old enemy of all true faith—selfishness. When a group begins to consider itself more important than those on the outside and forgets to pour time, energy and love into those who do not know Christ, they are doomed for failure. Can we ever truly expect the Holy Spirit to bless our efforts when we forfeit the great mission of building disciples that Jesus left to all of us? Remember never to allow your experience to be only about those who already are connected.

GROUP LIFE
BY MAX SEMENIK

