

I appreciate receiving weekly e-notes from the President of Ozark Christian College. Here's his lesson in a note on 1/21/2013:

Dear Ozark Family, I have a file folder of stories called "successful failures." In 1968, a chemist at 3M Corporation attempted to develop a super-strong adhesive, but instead accidentally created a "low-tack" reusable adhesive. It sat unused on 3M's shelves for the next 5 years. Art Fry, a 3M researcher who sang in his church choir, grew frustrated when his bookmarks kept falling from his hymnbook and suddenly remembered the low-tack "unglue." He applied it to his bookmarks, loved the reusable sticky markers, and the resulting Post-It Notes are now 3M's best-selling product. At first considered a failure, the adhesive became a huge success.

Maybe you have a "successful failure" story from your own life--something you initially thought was a bust, only to later discover a surprisingly good result. I do. Some Sundays, I find myself preaching a sermon that I know is just bad. When the sermon's a clunker, I just want to get done quickly, go home and try again next week. But in His great sense of humor, God often gives me the best response to my worst sermons. At the invitation, people are coming down the aisle! Decisions are being made. A lady is shaking my hand, saying, "You have no idea how that touched me." I'm thinking, "You're right. I have no idea how that touched you." Somehow an apparent failure becomes an ultimate success. . . and I know who gets the credit. God has a way of causing "everything to work together for the good" (Romans 8:28 NLT). In other words, God specializes in "successful failures."

So here's a story for this Martin Luther King day:

E. Stanley Jones knew something about success. The longtime twentieth-century missionary was known as "the Billy Graham of India," preached to millions, served as a confidant to U.S.A. Presidents, developed a close friendship with Mahatma Gandhi and earned a nomination for the Nobel Peace Prize (which was an honor at that time). Jones first book sold over a million copies, so when his later book *Mahatma Gandhi: An Interpretation* experienced tepid sales, he was disappointed. He'd had high hopes that Gandhi's example of peacemaking would challenge a world locked in Cold War. Instead, the book appeared headed for history's forgotten dustbin.

Until Stanley Jones left India to visit the United States in the 1960s. Here he met Dr. Martin Luther King, who told Jones that it was his book on Gandhi which inspired King's commitment to nonviolent civil disobedience. The Civil Rights Movement had discovered its guiding philosophy in Gandhi's life, and they had discovered Gandhi's life in Jones' book. Stanley Jones later wrote: "I thought my book *Mahatma Gandhi: An Interpretation* was a failure. It did not seem to dent the Western world with its emphasis on armaments. But when I saw Dr. Martin Luther King, he said, 'It was your book on Gandhi that gave me my first inkling of nonviolent noncooperation. Here, I said to myself, is the way for the Negro to achieve his freedom. We will turn this whole movement from violence to non-violence. We will match our capacity to suffer against his physical force, and we will wear our opponents down with goodwill.' 'Then my book was not a failure,' I replied. 'No,' he answered.

All of that to say this: Sometimes in God's economy, failure is not just the precursor to success. Failure is actually the primary ingredient of success. God gets the greatest glory for Himself when He takes something seemingly irredeemable and from the tragedy brings forth triumph. The lesson we learn? Never give up hope. When you find yourself in the midst of a despairing situation, remember that God really CAN cause "everything to work together for the good." He can bring light from darkness, beauty from ashes, victory from defeat.

Which, by the way, sounds like the cross. To followers of Jesus, the Friday when their dead carpenter-teacher-friend hung on the hill seemed like the lowest possible point in the trajectory of their lives. Little did they know: that Friday was actually the highest possible point in the trajectory of history itself. It would, in fact, be labeled "successful failure" . . . and the greatest story of them all. -- Matt Proctor, who is also this year's President of the North American Christian Convention which will meet in Louisville, KY July 9-12, 2013. I hope you will hear him speak there.