

"God's Standard of Success"

Ezekiel 2:1-5

July 8, 2012

6th Sunday After Pentecost

All of us want to be successful. Whether it's in our sports, in our hobbies, in our jobs, and in our personal relationships, we want to be successful. But how do we know when we have achieved success? By what standards do we measure success? We are shaped by our culture to measure success in a variety of ways: popularity (how many people like us); wealth (how much money or "stuff" we get from people); fame (how many people have heard of us); or honor (how people think of us). The more we have of those things, the more we can consider ourselves successful.

When it comes to church, we want to be successful, too. That's not necessarily a bad thing. But the same questions apply. How do we know when we have achieved success in our ministry? By what standards do we measure success in the church? We allow the culture to influence us and we surrender to the world's way of measuring success: church attendance (how many people are here on a weekly basis); buildings and budgets (how big and beautiful a church we have and how much money we have in the bank); respect (how much others in the Church value us); and reputation (how much we are liked in the community). The more we have of these things, the more we can consider our church to be a success.

There's a problem here. Sometimes the same standard cannot be applied to two different situations in exactly the same way. For example, if you consistently shoot a 65 for 18 holes of golf, you are good – very good. However, if you consistently roll a 65 for 10 frames of bowling, you are bad – very bad. In the same way, the standards by which success in the world is measured are not necessarily the same standards by which success in the church is measured and vice versa. God calls us to a different standard of success.

I read a story about a preacher who was invited back to preach in his home town. When he got there and preached, the people were not impressed. They remembered him as a rather ordinary kid growing up in that town. They didn't see what the big deal was about him now that he was grown

up. This preacher never ended up having much success. He never did gather much of a following except for when he was giving out free food or free medical treatment. He had only a dozen students and they often misunderstood or simply failed to understand his teachings. And of these few students, one denounced the preacher publicly and one was disloyal to him. The preacher was eventually captured by a lynch mob, convicted in a sham trial, and executed by the government.

By all objective standards measuring success, we would say that preacher was one of the greatest failures in the history of religion if this preacher was not Jesus Christ. He didn't have the numbers. He didn't have the cash. He didn't have the converts. And while He did have fame, it had more to do with the goodies he was giving out (free food and healings) than with His preaching. When He did preach some tough things, the Bible says that many of his followers turned back and no longer followed Him. It got to the point where Jesus asked the Twelve if they going to leave, too. His career seemed to end, not with political or military success, but with defeat and death.

However, what seems to be the worst failure ever is actually the greatest success of all. And it's a success because it's measured according to God's standard for success which is far different than the world's. It accomplishes what God wanted to accomplish – the salvation of all humanity – in the way in which God wanted to accomplish it.

Instead of man ascending to God by all of his good works and reaching out to Him (as many religions teach), God descends to man in the person of Jesus Christ and reaches out to man. Instead of man paying for the offenses of which he is guilty (which only seems fair), Jesus pays for all offenses, none of which He is guilty. Instead of paying for the offenses by the sacrifice of His enemies lives, Jesus pay with the sacrifice of His own life on a cross.. Instead of man solving the problem of death through medicine and technology (which would be quite a success), Jesus gains life for all humanity by overcoming death in His rising from His tomb to live forever. Instead of man gaining forgiveness, life, and salvation through the performance of religious rituals or the doing of great deeds (which would only seem right since you never get something for nothing), God grants forgiveness, fully and freely, on the basis of the humble death of Jesus on the cross and He grants

life, eternal and everlasting, on the basis of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. Rather than man saving himself (which would be the American and noble thing to do), God saves us. And, instead of conveying all these gifts through fantastic signs and wonders, God gives them through water poured on the head, humanly spoken words delivered into the ear, and simple bread and wine placed on the tongue.

By human standards, Jesus was an utter failure, handed over by His own people and executed by the Roman government. But this greatest failure, the cross, turns out to be God's greatest success for it accomplished God's plan to redeem you and me.

God's way of successfully delivering this salvation to the world is also not done according to the world's standard of success either. We think that we have to find a message that is popular with the people. We have to convey it in a way which people will enjoy. And we will have to do it in such a way that people will like us and fill our churches. If what we do is not popular, not fun, and does not produce instant and substantial numbers in terms of attendance and dollars, then we think are doing something wrong and we will have to change the content of the message, the delivery of the message, or the packaging of the message.

Yet that's not how the Lord acted in calling Ezekiel to be His spokesman in our Old Testament reading for today. The Lord's way of doing things and His expectations for success are much different than what we might think if we were in charge.

First, the Lord prepares Ezekiel for his task, not by giving him gimmicks and techniques for bringing in the people, but by giving him the Holy Spirit. It will be the Holy Spirit who guides and empowers Ezekiel in what he will say and do. Ezekiel doesn't have to depend on tricks of the prophetic trade or his skill and smarts.

Secondly, the Lord sends Ezekiel, not to people eagerly awaiting Ezekiel's message with the desire to repent, believe, and be saved, but to rebellious people. The Lord says, "Son of man, I send you to the people of Israel, to nations of rebels, who have rebelled against me. They and their fathers

have transgressed against me to this very day. The descendants also are impudent and stubborn.”

This is, by nature, not going to be an easy task.

Third, Ezekiel is to speak, not his own words, not a popular message, and not a message people want to hear, but “Thus says the Lord God.” He is to speak the Word of the Lord. He is to speak what is truthful, not what is popular. He is to speak what the people need to hear, not what they want to hear.

Finally, Ezekiel is to be concerned, not about being loved or accepted, but on being faithful to his calling and faithful to the Word of the Lord. That is the Lord’s attitude and His standard. The Lord says, “And whether they hear or refuse to hear (for they are a rebellious house) they will know that a prophet has been among them. In other words, while the Lord desires all to hear His word and be saved, whether they listen or refuse to listen is not the most important thing. The most important thing is that they have heard the truth.

The same is true for us in the 21st century. First, the Lord has prepared all of us in our vocations from pastor down to student, not by giving us gimmicks and techniques to get people into our seats and dollars into our coffers, but by giving us the Holy Spirit. Each of us, from young to old, big or small, sharp or simple, has received the Holy Spirit in our baptisms. The Holy Spirit will guide and empower us in what we are to say and do in our vocations. We don’t have to depend upon ourselves, our skills, or any tricks of the trade.

Second, we need to remember that the Lord is not sending us to people eager to repent and eager to hear the Gospel. This, I think, is what surprises and disappoints many Christians today. We think that people are just waiting for us to share the Gospel with them or invite them to church, when, in fact, they are not. The Lord is sending us to a rebellious people who not only are living contrary to the Law of God but enjoy it and don’t want to change. They are not only not interested in the Gospel of the forgiveness of sins and life everlasting, but they don’t feel they need forgiveness and do not care all that much about life after death. Instead of being a happy and easy task, speaking for the Lord is often a very disappointing and difficult job.

Thirdly, we are not to speak our own words, even if our words bring in the people, make them feel good about themselves, and raise great amounts of money. Everything which we speak should have a “Thus says the Lord God” behind it, even if people don’t like it, don’t believe it, don’t want to hear, and won’t join us here because of it. We are to speak the Law of God and its condemnation, regardless of whether it is liked, agreed with, or politically correct. We are to speak the Gospel of the Lord and its forgiveness, regardless of whether it is popular, desired, or thought to be needed. It is not about what WE say that’s important. It is “Thus says the Lord God” which is important.

Finally, we are to be concerned, not on being liked or whether our church grows or not, but on being faithful to our callings and faithful to the Word of the Lord. We have been given a serious calling and a solemn trust. As Paul says in 1 Corinthians, “Now it is required that those who have been given a trust must prove faithful.” While we desire all to hear the Word of the Lord, come to faith, join our church, and share in our ministry, whether this happens or not is not the most important thing. The most important thing is that they have heard the truth.

Paul sums it all up in his letter to Timothy in words which we need to hear and to heed today:

In the presence of God and of Christ Jesus, who will judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom, I give you this charge: Preach the Word; be prepared in season and out of season; correct, rebuke and encourage—with great patience and careful instruction. For the time will come when men will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, to suit their own desires, they will gather around them a great number of teachers to say what their itching ears want to hear. They will turn their ears away from the truth and turn aside to myths. (2 Timothy 4:1-4)

Preach, teach, and speak the Word of the Lord to people in all truthfulness. Love people with all sincerity. Serve people with all eagerness. Worry not about the numbers or the results.

Leave those up to the Lord and the work of the Holy Spirit. Then, whatever happens, you will have been successful – according to God’s standards. Amen.