

MEASURING SUCCESS

Sermon Preached by the Rev. Dr. Lindley G. DeGarmo
Union Church of Pocantico Hills
November 1, 2020

Psalm 107:1-7, 33-37

Matthew 23:1-12

The late Russell Baker, the satirist and New York Times correspondent, wrote in his autobiography about his mother's great impact on his life. She had been gone for years, he said, but his mother would still roam free in his head and wake him in the early morning before daybreak. "If there's one thing I can't stand, Russell, it's a quitter," she would say. He would protest, "But mother, I'm not a child anymore. I have made something of myself. I'm entitled to sleep late." "Russell," she would respond, "You've got no more gumption than a bump on a log. Don't you want to amount to something?"

Baker remembered when at the age of twenty-nine, he was assigned to cover the White House—as close to heaven as correspondent could get. He was puffed up with pride and went to see his mother, relishing the prospect of her approval and delight. He should have known better.

"Well, Russ," she said, "if you work hard at this White House job you might be able to make something of yourself."¹

"Make something of yourself." "Amount to something." "Be a success." What does it mean? How can I achieve it? How can I be a success? Does my faith, my religion have anything to say about it.?

Laura Nash is one of our leading thinkers about business ethics and leadership. She has taught at Harvard Business School and served as Program Director on Business and Religion at Harvard Divinity School. Nash is fascinated with the subject of success, which she calls "the biggest American preoccupation." She observes that the biggest misconception about success is that "achieving it will automatically bring satisfaction." It doesn't. "Nothing will be enough and success will never satisfy," she concludes. What success does bring, more often than not, is anxiety—*anxiety that I won't be able to keep up, that I'll lose it all, that something terrible might happen to my business or the market or to me. That kind of anxiety actually stifles creativity.*

Nash did extensive research with successful people, "High Achievers," and it produced some surprising discoveries. When nearing retirement and asked what they wanted to do next, high-achieving men often answered in terms of another achievement: "I'll get really good at golf." Many women high achievers, Nash discovered, responded, "I'll clean my closets, create some order and a space in my life for reflection." Which do you suppose is healthier?

Professor Nash suggests that there are four components of true success: *happiness* (or enjoyment)—which generally derives from human relationships; *achievement*—

¹ Russell Baker, *The Good Times* (New York: Random House, 1994), 1-3.

working hard and devoting yourself toward the end of doing well, whatever you are doing; *significance*—counting to others, making a difference somewhere, somehow; and *legacy*—not about how you will be remembered but about how some important part of you will continue to help others.² Success, in other words, has more to do with how you go about living your life than with specific, material accomplishments.

As far as we know, Jesus never took a course in Business and Religion, nor did he ever take up in so many words the topic of success. Yet throughout his ministry, Jesus taught his followers to live in the world with a new set of rules, with a new vocabulary, with new definitions for common words. It's as though he was defining for us an alternative reality in which to live out our lives. He called this alternative reality the kingdom of God, and he said it is present on earth when ordinary people like us live it out.

As we see in this morning's lesson, what Jesus taught his disciples often challenged traditional notions of what we might call success. He is using, as a foil—an example of what he does *not* mean—some people who, by any definition, were successful in his world: wealthy, influential, important, respected, highly successful. What he said about them is often interpreted as a critique of their Jewish practices. The scribes and Pharisees, he said, in their piety are a burden to everyone. They love the attention they receive. They wear big phylacteries (the leather straps around their forehead and arms) and long fringe on their robes—both symbols of devotion to the law of God. Jesus had no argument with the practice. He must have worn a phylactery himself. No, Jesus was challenging them on what was going on beneath the surface. They enjoyed their position too much. They played to it, postured. They defined success this way, by the admiration their piety generated.

The alternate reality—the truth, the saving truth, Jesus taught his disciples that day—is just the opposite: “The greatest among you will be your servant. All who exalt themselves will be humbled, and all who humble themselves will be exalted.”

Jesus was not opposed to success. In fact, Jesus called his followers to a rigorous life of hard work and selfless devotion and self-sacrifice. He called his men and women to be successful by a different standard: by giving life away, by dying a little, by serving others, humbly, faithfully, selflessly.

Does that really work? The wisdom of the world is that “nice guys finish last.” Can you live by Jesus' definition of success in the real world?

Some of you may have read the famous commencement speech the late Steve Jobs delivered at Stanford University back when he was at the peak of his fame. For those of you who don't know him, Steve Jobs founded Apple was one of the icons of the computer industry until his death from cancer in 2011. Under his leadership Apple developed the MacBook and the iPod and the iPhone and the iPad. He was by most standards monumentally successful.³

² Laura Nash and Howard Stevenson, *Just Enough: Tools for Creating Success in Your Work and Life* (Hoboken, NJ: John Wiley & Sons, Inc., 2004).

³ “Apple's Jobs is Most Powerful Businessman—Fortune,” *Reuters*, November 27, 2007.

His speech to the Stanford graduates is fascinating. Jobs dropped out of college after a few weeks because he thought it was a waste of his parents' hard-earned money. He slept on the floor of friends' dorm rooms, returned bottles for the five-cent deposit to buy food, and walked seven miles every Sunday to a Hare Krishna temple for a hot meal. He started Apple at twenty in his parents' garage; grew it to a multibillion-dollar company; hired a manager, who then fired him at the age of thirty from the company he had founded. He was devastated; he felt humiliated, a very public failure.

Gradually, however, he realized that his failure had not changed anything about him. He was still in love with what he did and so started again. He concluded that "the heaviness of being successful was replaced by the lightness of beginning again." He fell in love, married, started a family and a new business. And then, in a routine physical exam, he was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer, almost surely terminal. He was told, "Go home and get your affairs in order," which is doctors' code for "prepare to die."

A subsequent biopsy revealed that his cancer was treatable. He had the recommended surgery and entered a period of remission, with a whole new notion of what success is.

He told the Stanford graduates that he was looking in the mirror every day and asking, "If today were the last day of my life, would I want to do what I am about to do today? Whenever the answer is 'no' for too many days [he said,] I know I have to change something." He had learned what the psalmist meant when he said, "Number your days." "Remembering I'll be dead soon is the most important tool I've ever encountered to help me make big choices in life," Jobs said. "Because almost everything—all external expectations, all pride, all fear of embarrassment or failure—these things just fall away in the face of death, leaving only what is truly important."

"Your time is limited," he told the graduates. "Don't waste it."⁴

At the heart of our faith as Christians, followers of Jesus, is a commitment to live our lives on the basis of his teachings and the truth that we believe he represents. And at the very core of that truth is that notion that the very highest, holiest purpose of life is to give it away in love, that true greatness—true success, as Jesus defines it—is in serving others. A successful man or woman, in whatever work you do, is one who knows that and lives it. A successful church is a congregation of his followers who, together, live out that truth in their common service in the world. Together, St. Paul once said, they become a letter from Christ to the world, a love letter actually.⁵

It is stewardship time, which means that churches everywhere are talking about budgets and pledging and giving and are investing a lot of time and energy encouraging their members to give. The "Annual Drum Banging" for money, someone called it. The issue is not simply raising money. If it were just about raising money, we could save ourselves a lot of trouble and raffle off a BMW. This stewardship business is really about how you and I live our lives and what definition of successful living will guide us.

Martin Marty is a religious scholar and prolific author. He's retired now and will soon turn 93, but he was active well into his 80s. He said once toward the end of his

⁴ "You've Got to Find What You Love," Jobs Says," *Stanford Review*, June 14, 2005.

⁵ 2 Corinthians 3:2-3.

career that he still loved what he was doing so much that he had never taken a sabbatical. “These are the best years,” he said. “The only problem is that there are not as many of them left.”

Marty came across a new study of religion and life expectancy that had discovered “weekly attendance at a religious service is associated with increased survival and a boosted immune system.” Marty said, only partly in jest, “I guess I should spend my first post-retirement sabbatical sitting in a church pew.”

I thought about what a great Stewardship approach that might make: “Come to church and live longer.” or, even better, “Give a lot of money and live a really long time.”

And every year I remember what a friend used to say annually around stewardship time. She chaired the campaign once and wondered whether we couldn’t resurrect from the medieval church the idea of indulgences—that money given to the church reduces your time in purgatory—maybe the best stewardship idea ever. “Couldn’t you just say that if they raise their pledges, you’ll get them into heaven?” she asked.

We can’t do that. No one can make that promise.

What I can promise is what Jesus promised: that giving will save your life, that serving others will make you a success by the only measurement that ultimately matters.

Jesus Christ does not call us to be successful. He calls us to be faithful. “The greatest among you will be your servant,” Jesus said.

Parents who devote themselves to their children.

Sons and daughters who give their lives caring for an aging parent.

Wife or husband sitting, with patience and love, by the bedside of a sick spouse.

Teacher, tutor, care team member, hospital volunteer, loyal friend, compassionate colleague.

You, me, as we give our love, our time, our energy, our money to what we most deeply cherish and believe, and in the process learn the only true secret of success: to give our lives away in his name and for his sake.

The one who said, “If you lose your life for my sake you will find it” and “The greatest among you will be your servant.” The one who sets this table before us and bids us to come and be his guests. Jesus Christ our Lord.

To the Lord our God, Alpha and Omega, be all glory and honor forever. Amen.