



March 8, 2009

Preaching: Rev. Ronni Verboom

Mark 8:31-38

“Secrets of Success”

There’s a Joe Walsh song called “Life’s been good to me so far”—a wild song. The lyrics present a rock star reflecting on his life. There’s a humorous, ironic slant throughout. It tells us what we turn into when we follow the world’s signposts leading to “success”. We own mansions we’re too busy to live in, stay in lush hotels we’re too destructive to appreciate, drive expensive cars, hire chauffeurs if our driving privileges are revoked, drink all we want, in general: LIVE THE GOOD LIFE.

Really? Is that the good life? What is the secret of success?

Have you ever noticed, when someone asks, “What’s he worth?” what the question really means? What are we talking about when we consider what a person is worth? Are we asking, “How valuable is she to the community? Is this person living a life of integrity? How good a parent is he??” What are we asking when we say, “What’s he worth?” We show in our reply that we are simply asking, “How much money does he have?”

Simple quirks in our language reveal much about what we think and believe. We tend to equate value and success with accumulation of material goods or money. We sometimes point to other things as important to success: physical beauty, strength, power, talent. They too are yardsticks we use to measure what a person is worth.

Jesus had some other ideas about success. What is the secret to success, Jesus’ style? Let’s consider today’s passage in Mark’s gospel, and see what it teaches us.

Many times in the Bible, the PLACE where something happens can be equally important to the events themselves. Jesus and his followers had gone away, to a region called Caesarea Philippi. It was outside Galilee entirely. In its early history it was named for Ba'al, a pagan god who was worshipped in this urban center. Later it was believed to be the birthplace of the Greek god "Pan", the god of nature. By Jesus' time, the ruler Philip had built a temple of white marble there, in honor of Caesar, the Roman Emperor, the ruler of the world, considered by his subjects a god himself.

Right there, in a place where various forces and powers had been worshipped as gods, Peter, a humble Galilean fisherman, recognized Jesus, a homeless Galilean carpenter, as the Incarnation of the Living God: God in the flesh. In the words of William Barclay: "There, of all places, as it were, against the background of all religions and all history, Peter discovered that a wandering teacher from Nazareth, who was heading for a cross, was the Son of God."

This was a moment of success for Jesus. He knew little time remained for him, and it would all be for nothing unless at least ONE person had come to know him for who he really was. He couldn't just teach it, or tell it—it had to be discovered in the heart of the believer. And miraculously, Peter's heart told him the truth: "You are the Christ." The Messiah. The One long promised by our God.

On the heels of this success, Jesus immediately told his followers to keep his identity secret. Why? If the success of his ministry depended on others coming to know his identity, why didn't he want them proclaiming it?

It appears the reason they had to wait was this: Jesus still had to help them understand what being the Messiah was all about, what it really meant.

Here we learn a secret of success, Jesus' style. Success often consists of simply planting seeds. The world says nothing's a success until it makes the cover of "Time" or a photo spread in "People" magazine. Jesus says success comes slowly, quietly like a seed growing deep in the dark earth—sprouting, rooting, preparing itself for full flowering.

Remember all those Scriptures about praying in secret, and God who sees in secret will reward you? Remember the passages about doing good for others while not letting your left hand know what your right hand is doing?

Jesus needed to plant and water seeds of understanding in his disciples. Don't broadcast your successes, let them grow and evolve naturally. You see, Peter and the others had some very specific ideas about the messiah. Messianic ideas during

the time of Jesus were thoroughly developed. The Jews had regarded the period of King David's rule as the greatest period in their history. They longed for a day when another king from David's line would rise up and make them great in righteousness and power.

Jewish writings from the period between the Old and New Testaments taught the Messiah would come after a time of terrible tribulation. Terror would burst upon the world, standards of honor and decency would be ripped to shreds. Into this chaos, the Jewish prophet Elijah would return, as the forerunner of the Messiah. He was expected to be a great, super-human figure crashing into history to remake the world and vindicate God's people.

It was believed that the nations would ally themselves against the Messiah. In the end they would be completely annihilated. The Messiah was anticipated as the most destructive conqueror in all human history, smashing enemies into utter extinction. After this great cataclysm, Jerusalem would be renewed, Jews dispersed all over the world would return to the new Jerusalem, and a new age of peace and goodness would begin, to last forever.

These were the ideas current when Jesus came. They were violent, nationalistic, destructive and vengeful. They did result in the perfect reign of God, but only through bloodbaths and conquest.

Can you begin to see why Jesus might have encouraged his followers to hang onto the news that he was the Messiah? Can you also see why Peter had some problems with Jesus' next words? Jesus told them about how it was necessary for him to suffer and eventually, be killed. Peter took him aside and "rebuked" Jesus. Wow. What audacity: evidence that Peter was pretty sure of his own ideas about the Messiah. This stuff Jesus was spouting made absolutely no sense. It could have NOTHING to do with the success of their enterprise. Jesus whirled on Peter and rebuked HIM. "Get behind me Satan. These are not God's thoughts, but men's."

We've covered two secrets of success, Jesus'-style:

1. Don't broadcast your successes, let them grow in secret like seeds in the earth.
2. Resist Satan's message that proclaims good things must be established through destruction and coercive power that smashes, takes, forces, destroys.

Next Jesus turned to the crowds. This wasn't a message just for the disciples. He called any who wanted to follow him to deny themselves, take up the cross, and follow. What does Jesus reveal about success here? To be a success, you must tell the truth. Jesus never tried to BRIBE folks with the offer of an easy road. That's Secret of success # 3. Nothing can be accomplished outside the truth. And the road

of discipleship will not always be easy. Jesus' road to success meant being willing to be treated as a criminal, even to die. He tells us, as his followers, that we must be willing to sacrifice for him, to deny ourselves. That's Secret #4.

Denying ourselves is not simply denying ourselves THINGS, though it may be that. It means denying OURSELVES. We can still be self-serving even after giving away all we own and moving to a shack in a desert. The core of this secret of success is shifting our FOCUS away from SELF to God and others. Denying the self never means rejecting the self, or hating the self. Denying the self, refusing to be a slave to one's own wants and fears, brings forth the true self God created us to be.

One more secret: if you seek your life, you'll lose it. If you lose it for Christ's sake, you'll find it. Biblical success runs the opposite direction than the world's success. Think of your life as money. What good does it do to hoard it? If you never spend it, you can't reap the benefits of it. Our world encourages us to stockpile goods, money, abilities--- using them only to acquire more... goods, money, abilities. Biblical success is letting your goods, money and abilities pour forth in a constant stream that enriches life, yours and others around you.

Jesus gives us five secrets to success, for living as God created us to live.

1. Don't broadcast your successes, let them grow like seeds underground, to eventually bloom with the insight and wisdom acquired over time.
2. Resist the message of Satan that good things can only come to pass by the use of destructive power.
3. Tell the truth. Don't pretend life is easy because often it is not.
4. Accept sacrifice.
5. Spend, don't save, what you have and what you are, in service to Christ.

Ralph Waldo Emerson wrote a definition of success. For me, it describes what Jesus' secrets of success can lead to.

“To laugh often and much; to win the respect of intelligent people and the affection of children; to earn the appreciation of honest critics and endure the betrayal of false friends; to appreciate beauty; to find the best in others; to leave the world a better place whether by a healthy child, a garden patch, or a redeemed social condition; to know even one life has breathed easier because you have lived. This is to have succeeded.”

May God teach us and lead us to success, Jesus' style. Amen.