

July 12, 2009

Mark 6:14-29

“A success story?”

We all want to succeed in life, don't we? When we are young, we're encouraged to shine in every way possible: to get good grades, excel at sports, music and so on. We're exhorted in every way to do our very best. These things are viewed as success.

But, you know, some of us aren't cut out to excel in areas that are recognized. Some of us get average grades, are tone deaf and a little uncoordinated. We aren't going to stand out in academics, music or sports. We may have a knack for being a caring and constant friend. But that doesn't appear in grade reports or award ceremonies.

When we think of success, we think of what our world rewards. Certain jobs, professions and incomes signal SUCCESS. Certain life milestones signal SUCCESS: getting married, having children, owning a home. We all run into standards for success. We may not be consciously aware of them, but they do operate in our hearts and minds.

Clergy are not exempt from this. At our Annual Conference meeting the current appointments for the year are handed out. The list shows the names of every pastor and the church that pastor will be serving during the coming year. Clergy notice things like size of church, titles of positions (sole pastor, senior pastor, associate pastor), how many years the pastor has served a particular church, and so on.

Churches want to be successful. The marriage of business practices and church development has produced many churches we call “mega-churches”, with several thousand people gathering to worship every weekend. These churches hum with technology, provide dramatically beautiful campuses and worship spaces. There is an emphasis on “customer service”. Buildings are open seven days a week. Some house banks, pharmacies and schools. Extravaganzas are organized to bring alive the gospel. Former presidents, celebrities and music icons speak and sing. One church put on an outdoor display of extreme sports that included skate-boarders jumping over a fire to illustrate salvation.

Of course there are criticisms of these churches. Some say they represent the Disneyfication of religion. Others say they are not really in the religion business, but in the self-help trade. Some of the clergy drive luxury cars, live in 2 million dollar homes and travel in 10 million dollar jets.

Many voices rise to the defense of mega churches, pointing out they are using the tools of our age to bring the Christian faith where it would not otherwise exist. Many of these churches have recently displayed a new passion for caring for the poor and suffering of this world, as well.

These churches make me think of successful celebrities of our era like Bill and Melinda Gates and Bono—whose stories of riches and fame are wedded to a concern for the world and its people.

So----- what is success, really? What does the Word of God say about success, especially through the passage from Mark which describes the death of John the Baptist? Could we ever see THIS story as a success story? How does John's story foreshadow the story of Jesus?

The first few verses of our reading seem to paint Jesus as a success. Word of his amazing teachings, healings and miracles had spread throughout Galilee. He was becoming famous. People even thought he might be John the Baptist raised from the dead- or the prophet Elijah, who Scripture foretold would return to pave the way for the arrival of the Messiah. There was a real hubbub about Jesus--- his ministry was a great success!

Then, suddenly, we're brought into the story about Herod and John. Mark states in his first chapter that "the whole Judean countryside went out to him" as John was preaching and baptizing in the Jordan River. It seemed John experienced success, too- his fame was similar to the growing fame of Jesus.

Herod, the Jewish ruler and puppet of the occupying Romans, lived in a palace in Tiberias, on the Sea of Galilee. He heard all the talk about Jesus. He wrestled with a guilty conscience because he was responsible for John's death. The idea that Jesus could be John back from the dead seized Herod with an iron grip. He was afraid. Could it be true? At this point in the text we get a flashback, as if Herod was remembering the events of that night when he had John the Baptist killed.

John had been a fiery preacher. He passionately embraced God's call to speak the truth, even to those in power. He called King Herod to repent of his sin. And John even named the sin: Herod had stolen his brother's wife, Herodias. The inappropriateness of this marriage is complicated to grasp, but I will try to explain.

Jesus was born when Herod the Great was King. This is the Herod who met with the Magi and later had all boy babies in Bethlehem killed. Herod the Great was the father of Herod Antipas, the Herod in today's reading. Herod Antipas ruled Galilee during Jesus' adult life.

I once learned Herod the Great had three sons: Herod Philip, who lived as a wealthy citizen in Rome; Herod Antipas, who ruled Galilee; and Philip the Tetrarch. However, Herod had three SURVIVING sons. Near the end of his life he became insanely suspicious and murdered many members of his family, including four sons.

Herodias, the stolen wife in our story, was actually the daughter of one of the murdered sons. So, she was Herod Philip's and Herod Antipas's NIECE. She was the daughter of one of their half-brothers. First, Herod Philip married his dead brother's daughter, his niece. Then Herod Antipas went to visit him in Rome, seduced his niece/sister-in-law, and took her back to Galilee with him. Herodias brought her daughter, Salome, with her. Salome later married her father's other surviving brother, Philip the Tetrarch, her uncle.

What a mess! But these people were SUCCESSFUL. They prospered and flourished, enjoying kingdoms, land, castles, wealth. John the Baptist, whose ministry was flourishing, whose ministry was a SUCCESS, rebuked Herod—fully aware of the ruler's power. Somewhat predictably, as we all know the ways of this world, John was arrested, bound, beaten, then tied to iron hooks in the dungeon of the palace.

When we read the Bible, we think of John as one of the heroes. He was on the RIGHT SIDE—a GOOD GUY. But let's try to project ourselves back in time to Herod's birthday party, Would John's story look like a success story back then? Picture the banquet hall: beautifully illuminated, adorned with hanging tapestries, guests robed in lush fabrics, the banquet table loaded with food and drink, surrounded by musicians, entertainment.

Now picture the dungeon: dank, dark, damp, cold, smelly, groaning prisoners dying around you, insects and rodents scurrying. Then came the beheading: sounds and smells we don't want to imagine. And then the platter was brought to the banquet hall, bringing the horror of the dungeon into the beauty of the feast.

If we had been there, who would we have seen as the success? Herod or John? Perhaps neither.

It's troubling that this flashback appears at this point in Mark's gospel. Bible commentator Lamar Williamson believes this is no coincidence. He suggests the death of John foreshadows the death of Jesus. John carried out a successful ministry, he preached the truth God called him to preach and he was delivered up to the powers of this world and killed. Jesus carried out a successful ministry, preached the truth God spoke through him, and he was delivered up to the powers of this world and killed. Mark even included the disciples in this pattern—they are sent out, they preach and heal, they have great success, but they too will be delivered up to the powers of this world, and those powers will appear to win out with the last word of success.

These stories lead to brutality and death—NOT SUCCESS STORIES in the world's eyes. But our faith teaches that being FAITHFUL TO GOD is the DEFINITION OF SUCCESS. (Repeat.)

Success is being faithful to God's will and Christ's ways. Success is being faithful to God's will and Christ's ways. Success is being faithful to God's will and Christ's ways.

Can we begin each morning remembering that truth? Can we learn to ignore what the world teaches? Can we move into our afternoons looking for success by living as Christ lived? Can we end each day and end all of our days knowing we gave following Christ and obedience to God's will FIRST PLACE in each day, FIRST PLACE in our lives? Thank God he is a forgiving God, for this is not natural to us. This is not our preference. This is not our aim much of the time. But when we follow Jesus and live as he lived, we are a success in the only way that matters.

John's and Jesus' stories are stories of amazing success, made possible by God's Holy Spirit. May that same Spirit inhabit our minds, bodies and souls, teaching us to live: faithful to God's will and Christ's ways. AMEN.