

“HOW TO OVERCOME SUCCESS”

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Mother Theresa said, “God has not called us to be successful, but to be faithful.” She said that as some were appalled that her Home for the Dying in Calcutta was less than bright and efficient. Everything was clean, yes, but her goal was to impart hope, peace, and dignity to the dying rather than create a shiny institution.

Mother Theresa is worth hearing today as we welcome a score of new members. After all, it’s easy to focus too much on reveling in how many teens were at youth group on Sunday? Did you see how many children went to Church School? How many new members does that make this year? Faith and ministry deal in such intangibles it is a natural temptation to seek tangible evidence to show our worth. Our society of instant information wants measurable signs to validate what we are doing. But we can do good and faithful work, and instead of being content at bringing blessing to the world instead we sag and ask, “What am I doing wrong?”

Don’t get me wrong, I want FCC, Darien to thrive. I work hard to make this faith community prosper. But paradoxically, how we express that matters a great deal. For if our heart and soul is bringing the love of the gospel of Jesus Christ into the world, we cannot fall into the trap of measuring success by the world’s standards.

In his memoirs, Russell Baker recounts his years as a correspondent in Europe:

”I was at the top of the ladder and enjoying excessive praise...All ambition seemed to have been satisfied. My mother had taught if I worked hard I could amount to something, could make something of myself. She proved right, yet I was vaguely dissatisfied. Though I couldn’t put this uneasiness in words, I felt that success ought to make life satisfying, ought to bring a peace of mind, a maturity, a serenity toward life, which I didn’t feel...I was discovering...that hunger for success was bred into so many Depression youngsters that our likes were powerless to stop chasing it long after we had achieved it”

Baker is right, once we get hooked into that, it is hard to get unhooked. We strive toward ever-greater horizons of success, not so much because we want to cure cancer, fix government, write the definitive novel, or bring heaven unto earth. We strive—endlessly and mercilessly—because we are afraid of being average, of going unnoticed, of being lost in the crowd. So much striving around us has the flavor of an immortality project, that is, the attempt to justify our existence. “By golly, we *will* carve out our own niche in the glittering firmament of ‘making it’, even if it kills us.” And too often worship of this idol does kill us, and our children

Do we spend our days as precious gifts of God of which we are stewards? Or do we spend them frenetically scaling that heap where we hope to be king of the hill? Baker is right. Perhaps the very worst critic to whom we never quite prove ourselves is ourselves. Someone once observed that viewed from the inside,

everyone's life looks like a failure. So much consuming energy is attempting to fix this ourselves when only God can fix it. So many of our days are devoid of joy, the work of the hamster to flying ahead on the wheel propelled by his own effort.

Father Henri Nouwen had it right when he confided these thoughts to a friend:

"Aren't you, like me, hoping that some person, thing, or achievement will come along to give you that final feeling of inner well-being you desire? Don't you often hope: 'May this book, idea, course, trip, job, country, or relationship fulfill my deepest desire.' But as long as you are waiting for that moment you will go on running helter-skelter, always anxious and restless, always lustful and angry, never fully satisfied...This compulsiveness keeps us going and busy, but at the same time it makes us wonder whether we are getting anywhere in the long run. This is the way to spiritual exhaustion and burn-out."

What is most ironic, Henri Nouwen always liked to observe, is how obsessed we get with upward mobility while professing to follow a Messiah who only modelled downward mobility. Of course, Jesus preached like this in today's Gospel text. "The hour is coming for the Son of Man to be glorified," Jesus begins. And by glory we somehow suspect that he is not taking aim at the top prize in *American Idol*. "Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit. Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life."

This is a different approach to glory, even a different glory. It's not about a glittering walk down a red carpet or having the most hits on your website. It's about Jesus sinking deep into our being—even into the deepest depths of our struggle and suffering—so we might rise up to glorify God with lives we are meant to lead.

Jesus said to enter God's reign and help inaugurate it, we must become like little children. We must be willing to become small, humble, and insignificant. And he gave us an apt image for the coming spring. A grain of wheat falls into the earth. It is covered with soil. It becomes invisible to the eye. A tiny grain of wheat dies to itself as one grain. But out of that dying, God creates an abundance otherwise impossible, a surplus that can't be seen except as glimpsed through eyes of faith.

Jesus asks how can we who are infatuated with greatness become so small as to pass through the eye of a needle? How can we get beyond our need to strut in whatever social setting we find ourselves? How can we resist feeling the misfortunes of those who are above us somehow elevate us? We live in a culture that lives off building up shimmering celebrities as gods and then delights as they fall.

In his autobiography, *Timebends*, playwright Arthur Miller reflects on his marriage to Marilyn Monroe. Talk about an unhappy symbol of success, right? During the filming of the *Misfits*, her last movie, Miller watched the goddess of popular culture descend into depression and despair. He feared for her as he witnessed their widening estrangement, her paranoia, and her growing dependence upon barbiturates to medicate herself from that treadmill of success from which she

couldn't descend. Her incredible success only led her to despair. One evening, after a doctor had been persuaded to give Monroe yet another shot, Miller stood watching as she slept. "I found myself straining to imagine miracles," he mused. "What if she were to wake and I were able to say, 'God loves you, darling,' and she were able to believe it. How I wish I still had my religion and she hers."

Someone said the first great tragedy of life is when our dreams don't come true. The last great tragedy is when our dreams do come true, and we still feel empty. Because America is the land of opportunity, we are a challenged people like this. William James wrote, "the worship of the bitch-goddess success is our national disease." Indeed the god of success is a relentless and demanding god whose thirst is never slaked. It breeds resentment and bitterness. The poor get written off in a land where everyone should "make it". The rich and prominent end up hating themselves, because in this cult, one is never rich and prominent enough.

Jesus never let himself become so big that he couldn't become small. So many examples of what the world likes to call failure God reckons as righteousness. Multitudes of saints lived in poverty, faced opposition, persecution, or were killed trying to spread the faith. All of the apostles, except for St. John, died as martyrs.

We're so fearful of failure we miss the spiritual challenge of overcoming success. Today Jesus lifts another dream, the dream where God reigns over the universe, and we all have a small but vital part as instruments in that greater movement. Can you see greatness in that? Can we enter that glory as a community? Amen.