

Beyond Success and Failure

©April 26, 1998 Catherine M. Wallac3

First Presbyterian Church

Wilmette IL

Luke 6: 20-38

Isaiah 65: 17-25

No matter how well we do, we might do better. No matter what success we achieve, some greater achievement is possible. We climb the highest mountain we can see, but from its top we discover see some taller mountain yet--some greater peak out there, *looking down at us*. The problem here goes far beyond any simple lack of self-esteem. There is some unquiet, uncertain yearning at the heart of us, some vague and nagging dissatisfaction that we can struggle to comfort with prestige and income and achievement. But it doesn't work. We can just about kill ourselves with greater and greater sacrifices to get to higher and higher levels of success--but that success still doesn't quiet our restless hearts.

We get into this trap--or at least I get into this trap--because there is a stage at which success is a wonderful thing. When we work very hard for something, *and it works out*, we are delighted. And that's fine. That's appropriate. It's appropriate as a glass of fine red wine is appropriate with a plate of lasagna. But our souls can be troubled by ambition just as our bodies can be poisoned by alcohol. Success can be as addictive and as toxic as scotch or chardonnay if we don't understand that material success cannot meet our spiritual needs.

I've been up close against this issue in my own life lately, and in response to these experiences I've had two lines of scripture running in my head--driving me crazy, in fact, like some obnoxious commercial jingle. The first is from Isaiah: "They shall build houses

and inhabit them; they shall plant vineyards and eat their fruit." Isaiah proposes that we think about the moral issue here as a problem in real estate, and his metaphor works remarkably well. My trouble, I realized, is that instead of moving into a place and eating its fruit, I can so easily be seduced into lusting after even bigger houses, even better vineyards.

Wilmette, for instance, is lovely town: every time I come up here to preach, I'm impressed all over again with the beautiful homes, the wide streets, the huge old trees. What a gorgeous place. But on some invisible scale of prestige, Wilmette is not Kenilworth. But Kenilworth certainly isn't Lake Forest either. And even in Lake Forest, some of the mansions are nicer than other mansions, don't you think? Even in Wilmette, some people distinguish between the east side of the railroad tracks and the west side of tracks, over toward the interstate, or north and south of Lake Avenue. Why, some folks say there is even a difference between east Wilmette and east-east Wilmette, at the lakefront.

No matter where we live, in short, no matter how fruitful our vineyard, we can spend our days and our nights gazing across these boundaries and coveting our neighbor's goods. Isaiah has a point when he proclaims that in the ultimate blessing of God we will for once simply *inhabit* our houses and *relish* the fruits of our labor, without fear of envy and without fear of loss.

And it's not just real estate. For instance, I mailed out a book manuscript this week, a big manuscript that is the fruit of many year's labor. This manuscript has been rejected by so many different publishers that if United Parcel Service offered "frequent flyer miles" then I could have packed my three kids into a carton and sent them to their grandmother for spring break. As I lugged the box into the UPS depot, I half expected the clerk behind the counter to recognize me and make some sarcastic remark.

On the other hand, somewhere in Pennsylvania there is an editor who wants to read my work. The world is full of writers who would be thrilled out of their socks if a publisher wanted to read their stuff. So do I dare to inhabit the house which is to be pleased by an editor's willingness? Or do I have to wait to be happy, do I have to delay my

gratification, until I can trade up to a bigger house yet, the house on the street called "Publication"?

It's hard. It's remarkably hard. The economic structures of popular culture are set up to make us run like muzzled greyhounds chasing a mechanical bunny down the track, completely unaware that the system is rigged so that we will never, ever, catch up with what we are chasing. The system is designed systematically to insure that we never sit back, secure and satisfied and at peace with our lives, because were we contented we might not work such long hours, we might not sacrifice quite so much to our careers. We might both produce less and consume less, which would be catastrophic for the economy in general.

What would it mean for us to ruffle our feathers and rejoice at whatever goes right? At *whatever* goes right, on its own terms, big or small or middling, without the "what if" and without the "yes but." Is that *unprofessional*? Is it *naive*? Or is it living in the kingdom of God?

These are questions we all have to answer, because we cannot escape from their echoes, no matter what jobs we have or how our careers are coming along. For instance, I *did* have a book published just seven weeks ago. Getting a book accepted for publication in the trade press brought a whole new set of worries: sales and reviews and all of that. Whether or not I ever make the *New York Times* best seller list.

Eighteen months after carrying *that* manuscript into the UPS depot, I find myself not ruffling my feathers delightedly but all too often struggling hard with the old familiar fears of failure. I was on the "Today" show a month ago, but the interviewer was hostile and I left feeling stupid. Does that mean it doesn't "count"? And who, exactly, is keeping count? There was an article about me in the *New York Times* last weekend. But it was on Saturday, in the religion pages, not on Sunday, in the book section. Should I be disappointed?

Is the glass half-empty or is it half-full? Can I trust Luke's promise that in the kingdom of God "good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap"--a measure neither half full nor half empty but overflowing? If I can trust the line, what does it mean--what does it really mean in my life, right here and now? I'll have a

stack of email from my publisher tomorrow morning, and I have to cope with them. You have to cope with whatever Monday morning brings into your life. Can we trust this line from Luke?

That line from Luke that kept playing in my mind, over and over and over again, the whole time I was on booktour: "good measure, pressed down, shaken together . . . for the measure you give will be the measure you get back." When I was on tour, my publicist kept calling to find out how many people showed up to a booksigning or how a major interview had gone. I politely reported the facts she wanted to know, but in my head I kept hearing Luke and his promise of good measure. I couldn't explain to my young, ambitious, aggressive New York publicist that working hard and worrying about outcomes can be two utterly separate things, that responsibility and anxiety are two altogether different attitudes.

I find her anxiety contagious, and she finds me inexplicable and somewhat threatening. We drive each other crazy, measure for measure, but we will be working together closely for months to come. I wonder what Luke would say?

When being a writer gets me down like this, I start having dreams about being a plumber instead. I dream of doing some work where a puddle on the floor will testify unequivocally to the difference between success and failure. But life as a plumber--or a lawyer, or a sales rep, or a homemaker, or anything else you can imagine--is neither more nor less complicated than life as a writer. No matter what we achieve, we can manage to put happiness and satisfaction on hold until we achieve something else. Today's readings from Isaiah 65 and Luke 6 are parallel accounts of what life is like not "on hold" but in what Jews call "the Promised Land" and Christians call "the kingdom of God." One of the key words in this tradition is "blessing," and a close look at what that word means can help us to understand the temptation to use material goods and material success to silence or to numb the deeper and more important spiritual needs haunting our lives.

At the level of linguistics and language evolution, "blessing" is an extremely ancient Hebrew word whose meanings are arranged in something like concentric circles. At very outside edge, there is the dictionary definition: to be blessed is to belong, with a

secondary sense of cherished or delighted-in or cared-for. The opposite of "blessing" is not sin but curse: to be cursed is to be separated, to be exiled, to lose out and find yourself alone.

But if we look deeper than dictionary definition, if we look to word-stems and to the history of word stems, then at its deepest core the word "blessing" means "life," life understood as the aliveness, the vitality, of that which lives. Life itself, in short, is a blessing. It is a blessing just to be alive.

Life is not a contest to be won. Life is not a problem to be solved. Life is not--as a recent best seller claims--merely the byproduct of DNA seeking molecular immortality. Nor are we merely insignificant specks on an insignificant speck on the edges of a third-rate solar system on the fringes of one little galaxy out of billions. No. We are blessed, and the principal evidence of this blessing is that we are here in the first place. Blessing is not something we earn by succeeding; it is something we are given with the very breath of life within us. Our lives do have meaning, and the meanings all come down to this: we belong to God, who loves us and sustains us no matter what.

As life itself is a blessing, so the continuance of life is a blessing. At the second step out from the core, the root stem of the word "blessing" means both fertility and good harvest. Babies are a blessing, but so is the means whereby to stay warm and fed throughout the cold winter.

And this is where the problems are, right here, right exactly here. Success is a kind of fertility, isn't it? Success is no more and no less for us than harvest is for a farmer. So when we fail, we feel cursed. A rejected manuscript shows up in my mailbox in a battered round-trip cardboard box. Judge or jury return an unfavorable verdict. The sale goes to some other dealer, the deal falls through, billable hours plummet, the job offer we hoped for is made to someone else or, worse yet, the job we have now disappears out from under us.

We all know what this feels like, and "cursed" is not an unreasonable way to describe it. Furthermore it is a reliable part of life for every single one of us. Failures large and small, like successes large and small, sit on the table of life like salt-and-pepper

shakers--except that somebody else always seems to be in charge of seasoning our meals.

The easy way out, the simple all-American solution here, is to suppose that our failures are God's way of punishing us for our sins. By these lights, our response to failure should be guilt. There have always been people who feel that way, who argue that way, and so there's plenty in the Bible to support it.

But there are also innumerable voices arguing that both life and God are a lot more complicated. The race is not always to the swift, we read in Ecclesiastes, nor bread to men of wisdom. Or in Matthew we read that God maketh the rain to fall upon the just and the unjust alike.

If life itself is a blessing, then of course we are doubly blessed when it's summertime and the living is easy. But the greatest blessing of all, the Bible tells us, is to get through the winters of our discontent, the winters of failures and hardship and heartbreak, and to get through it all with our essential humanity intact. The real threat of failure, after all, the fundamental terror that gives failure its force, is the fear of death or its psychological equivalent. We fear that somehow we will be destroyed. Somehow we will be annihilated. So we work as if our lives depend upon our success, as if our lives depend upon our own achievements, rather than living in faith and in confidence that our lives depend upon a generous and loving God, a God upon whom we can depend for our survival--no matter what the markets in Asia do, no matter what mergers, no matter what your mother-in-law comes up with next or what your next medical exam reveals. We can live in the reality that life is eternal, and our lives are holy, and ultimately our happiness is absolutely guaranteed.

And what difference does that make? It makes all the difference in the world.

If there is in fact a God in whom we trust--not as words stamped on the coins in our pockets but as a sustaining reality deep in our hearts--if there is a God who is with us always, despite our economic failures and our moral failures and all the injustices of the marketplace, then what these Scriptures offer us this morning is an extremely dangerous change in our perceptions, an utterly subversive paradigm shift.

The kingdom of God is a place to stand--a place called "church," perhaps--from which we can see and we can say that this whole race is rigged. Within the marketplace, within the ordinary economic structures of our society, highly educated professionals are understood as roughly equivalent to expensive equipment or particularly valuable farm animals. Even in systems based on slavery, slaves with special training or valuable talents were better fed and better housed than unskilled laborers or field hands.

And most professionals that I know could not possibly work harder or longer hours even if we were slaves. We are carefully flattered with illusions of control and power, but in fact most organizations behave ruthlessly toward employees at any level. Chains of gold confine just as effectively as chains of cheap iron. We are seduced by the gold we are paid, we are flattered by the prestige of our job-titles, and above all we are muzzled and hounded by the manipulative psychology of success according to which we can never afford to be content and we can certainly never afford to be generous.

Luke lays out the path of our freedom, the North Star guiding us to a new life that many people on the North Shore simply can't imagine. When we are honest, when we look honestly at our lives, any of us can see the ways or the places in which we are indeed starving and grieving and impoverished despite our fine houses with their freezers full of food. If we are courageous, we can see the ways in which we feel both resented and threatened by those against whom we are competing, week after week after week, chasing the same mechanical bunnies around the same tracks.

No doubt many of us have enjoyed some measure of success as the world counts success, but most of us are also frustrated, exhausted, worried, and besieged by a thousand demands that none of us can master. And if we admit that, if we stop buying into the cultural and economic systems that are making us miserable, we are on the path toward liberation.

Scripture promises that there is indeed a path to gladness and singleness of heart, that there is a peace beyond human understanding. It doesn't involve changing the economic systems that govern our world, just as Jesus' ministry did not involve leading some successful revolt against the Roman empire. The Romans were there to stay, at

least for another few centuries. And so is the stock market, or the market for books, or the legal system, or the school system, or what have you.

But there is one thing we can do. We can refuse to worship Caesar as Lord. We can refuse to worship success. We can quietly, simply, subversively refuse to treat one another as we do not want to be treated: "judge not and you will not be judged; condemn not and you will not be condemned; forgive and you will be forgiven; give and it will be given you, good measure . . . for the measure you give will be the measure you get back." There is no escape that does not demand that we hold the door open for others.

The very first step on this path, I argue, is to rejoice in the day that the Lord has made, to inhabit the houses we have built, to eat the fruit of the vineyards we have planted, and above all to delight in that full measure packed down and overflowing. "Be glad and rejoice forever in that which I create," God says, "for behold, I create Jerusalem a rejoicing and her people a joy" In obedience, we can set out deliberately to cultivate a grateful heart.

That is a remarkably dangerous act, no matter how small our efforts. For instance, this week, just this one week, try to be grateful for clean hot and cold running water. There are many places on this planet where clean hot and cold running water would be simply miraculous. So for the next week, don't drink a glass of water, don't turn a faucet, without stopping just for the blink of an eye to give thanks: Praise God, from whom all blessing flow.

Amen, Alleluia, Alleluia.