

What Is Success?

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Community Church of Wilmette

The first reading is Genesis 28:10-19a, 28:10

"Jacob left Beer-sheba and went toward Haran.

He came to a certain place and stayed there for the night, because the sun had set. Taking one of the stones of the place, he put it under his head and lay down in that place.

And he dreamed that there was a ladder set up on the earth, the top of it reaching to heaven; and the angels of God were ascending and descending on it.

And the Lord stood beside him and said, 'I am the Lord, the God of Abraham your father and the God of Isaac; the land on which you lie I will give to you and to your offspring; and your offspring shall be like the dust of the earth, and you shall spread abroad to the west and to the east and to the north and to the south; and all the families of the earth shall be blessed in you and in your offspring.

Know that I am with you and will keep you wherever you go, and will bring you back to this land; for I will not leave you until I have done what I have promised you.'

Then Jacob woke from his sleep and said, 'Surely the Lord is in this place--and I did not know it!' And he was afraid, and said, 'How awesome is this place! This is none other than the house of God, and this is the gate of heaven.'

So Jacob rose early in the morning, and he took the stone that he had put under his head and set it up for a pillar and poured oil on the top of it. He called that place Bethel; but the name of the city was Luz at the first."

Here ends the reading

I grew up in a household with high expectations. I was expected to work hard and stay out of trouble. To be responsible, reliable, kind. Nothing wrong with any of that.

But I was also expected to succeed. More to the point, all of the grownups in my world seemed to agree that hard work and good behavior will always lead to success. If I wasn't doing well, I just wasn't working hard enough or I wasn't paying attention. The link between hard work and success was unquestioned. It seemed beyond question.

But by the time I was in my late forties, I started to question this connection. Partly, I'd seen once too often that talent plus hard work does not necessarily add up to success. The race is not always to the swift.

But there was a deeper problem. I found myself feeling morally obligated to be outstanding. Not just polite, hard-working, reliable, responsible. Successful. To be less than outstandingly successful was to be inadequate. Shabby, somehow. Irresponsible. "Average" and "ordinary" really meant mediocre, and mediocre was inexcusable. That's the "Protestant work ethic," and it's in the air we breathe as Americans.

But what is success?? Where is the bar set? Who is keeping score, and what exactly are they counting? How do I know where I stand? If success really matters--or because success really matters--I needed to know.

And I didn't. Ten years ago I had a very bad moment with this question. I was in a hotel somewhere in Texas, on a book tour, on the phone, listening to my publicist obsess over sale figures. She was a very anxious person. She called every day, and day by day she was driving me crazy.

After we hung up it dawned on me that no matter how many of my books had sold, we might always have sold more. Sell a million copies, and you might still have sold a million and one. It's an infinite regress: more is never enough. I hung up the phone and sat staring at the blank face of a turned-off TV. I felt just as blank inside, staring at that infinite regress.

If I'm morally obligated to be successful, and I can't define "success" in some clear and stable way, then where am I? Who am I??

And what do I do now?? I stared at the silent TV, clueless.

Everybody has a moment like this sooner or later. Sooner or later, we all realize that success is not a race to be won or lost. It's a squirrel cage in which we run round and round and round--unless we find a way out of the cage.

The readings for this morning offers a key to that cage. In the Genesis passage we heard a minute ago, God promises Jacob that God will always be with him and with his descendants even when they are blown like dust to the four corners of the earth. That might be an image of fabulous success--like the sun never setting on the British empire. But it might also be an image of crushing, unspeakable failure: the utter dispersal and oblivion of Jacob's lineage. Being turn to dust is a major biblical image for abject failure. So you can read God's prediction here either way. It's very ambiguous. It's ambiguous in deliberate, powerfully literary way. The puzzle gets even deeper when God says "I will bring you back here." Does he mean here, geographically, or does he mean here, spirituality, back to God's immediate presence?

So what does it mean, then, what is it worth for us that God is with us always, no matter what?

I think the answer to that question depends upon what sort of character God is.

So let's look at the seconding reading for today, a reading from the Wisdom of Solomon, and as we read let's listen for an answer to the question, Who is God? Who is God, and what good is he when, say, economic news is really grim? How can God's presence help when we are feeling inadequate, or mediocre, or--heaven help us--like abject *failures*.

Let's read today's passage together in a very old fashioned way: the women will read the first half of each poetic sentence, and the men will read the second half. In Hebrew poetry, the usual thing is that first half of a sentence says something, and the second half repeats the same idea in slightly different words. But poets get bored with repeating exactly, so the second half sometimes puts a spin on the first half. The

second half makes some sneaky or interesting comment on the first half. Today's passage does that over and over again.

Wisdom of Solomon 12:13, 16-19

For neither is there any god besides you,
 whose care is for all people,
 For your strength is the source of righteousness,
 and your sovereignty over all causes you to spare all.
 For you show your strength when people doubt the completeness of your power,
 and you rebuke any insolence among those who know it.
 Although you are sovereign in strength,
 you judge with mildness,
 and with great forbearance you govern us;
 for you have power to act whenever you choose.
 Through such works you have taught your people that the righteous must be kind,
 and you have filled your children with good hope,
 because you give repentance for sins.

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So--what kind of character is God? What good can God do on bad Tuesdays in Texas? First, God cares for everyone, we are told. Not just for the winners. That doesn't matter to God. Our core worth, our essential value or personal identity, is not at risk. Success does not define a person's moral worth because God defines our moral worth. And that definition is settled. Jesus said so.

Secondly, the measure or the proof of God's power is God's generosity, forbearance, and forgiveness. Now that's a remarkable claim. Real power, real status, are demonstrated by generosity, forbearance, and forgiveness. Not by best-seller lists, profit margins, or the size of your house? Oh. There's a thought. "You have taught your people," Solomon says, "that the righteous must be kind."

Okay then. What would it do to our lives if all our anxious struggles to succeed were displaced by confidence in the power of kindness and tolerance and generosity. Not the power of money and status.

This is a very dangerous idea. It's very dangerous. Unplugging anxieties can change a life in all sorts of strange ways. Day by day, over and over and over again, we can walk away from the squirrel cage of "more is never enough." We can walk away from that cage and back into the presence of God. Away from the insanity of an consumerist society and back toward the idea that the righteous are called to be kind. Not rich, not famous, not successful. Kind.

We can be pleased when our careers or our kids are doing well without being devastated when they aren't, because our *real* ambition in life is to attain what Jesus elsewhere calls the peace beyond human understanding. Only when our lives are grounded in that inner peacefulness will we find the strength it takes to forgive others. Only from within that astounding peace and inner security can we find our way toward generosity and tolerance. The righteous are called to be kind.

I'd like to end by reading together Psalm 139. By praying it, by letting it soak in. No matter where I go, the poet says, God is with me. As we read this psalm, let all the places that the poet names resonate out to all the places in your life where you need this God to show up-- to show up and unlock the cages where you can feel trapped and miserable. Let us pray, as before, the women beginning.

Psalm 139:1-12, 23-24

Oh Lord, you have searched me and known me.
 You know when I sit down and when I rise up;
 you discern my thoughts from far away.
 You search out my path and my lying down,
 and are acquainted with all my ways.
 Even before a word is on my tongue, O LORD,

you know it completely.

You hem me in, behind and before,
and lay your hand upon me.

Such knowledge is too wonderful for me;
It is so high that I cannot attain it.

Where can I go from your spirit?

Or where can I flee from your presence?

If I ascend to heaven, you are there;
if I make my bed in Sheol, you are there.

If I take the wings of the morning
and settle at the farthest limits of the sea,
even there your hand shall lead me,
and your right hand shall hold me fast.

If I say, "Surely the darkness shall cover me,
and the light around me become night,"
even the darkness is not dark to you;
the night is as bright as the day,
for darkness is as light to you.

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Amen I say. Amen, alleluia, alleluia