

3 February 2019

God Wants You to Succeed

Luke 4:1-13

We read from the Gospel of Luke, chapter 4, verses 1-13.

⁴ Jesus, full of the Holy Spirit, returned from the Jordan and was led by the Spirit in the wilderness, ²where for forty days he was tempted by the devil. He ate nothing at all during those days, and when they were over, he was famished. ³The devil said to him, 'If you are the Son of God, command this stone to become a loaf of bread.' ⁴Jesus answered him, 'It is written, "One does not live by bread alone." '

⁵Then the devil led him up and showed him in an instant all the kingdoms of the world. ⁶And the devil said to him, 'To you I will give their glory and all this authority; for it has been given over to me, and I give it to anyone I please. ⁷If you, then, will worship me, it will all be yours.' ⁸Jesus answered him, 'It is written,

*"Worship the Lord your God,
and serve only him." '*

⁹Then the devil took him to Jerusalem, and placed him on the pinnacle of the temple, saying to him, 'If you are the Son of God, throw yourself down from here, ¹⁰for it is written,

*"He will command his angels concerning you,
to protect you",*

*¹¹and "On their hands they will bear you up,
so that you will not dash your foot against a stone." '*

¹²Jesus answered him, 'It is said, "Do not put the Lord your God to the test." ' ¹³When the devil had finished every test, he departed from him until an opportune time.

In the 1980s, a new style of doing church appeared with a bang – the Contemporary Suburban Megachurch. It started in Chicago at Willow Creek, but the church that made the biggest splash was the Saddleback Valley Community Church in Orange County, California, started by Rick Warren. These churches were an intentional attempt to reach the Baby Boomers who had left their parents' fusty old churches in the 60s and 70s but now were having kids and starting to think that maybe they should take them to church somewhere. So church planters like Warren studied demographics, targeted their intended audience with the best marketing techniques, adopted an informal style and dress code, brought in rock-style bands to lead worship, and used all the latest tech both in worship and communication. Warren described this genuinely brilliant entrepreneurial plan in his book *The Purpose Driven Church*, in which he asked the question, "If God has called you to pastoral ministry, don't you think God has called you to be *successful* in that ministry?" The new style worked, for a while at least. As you look at the graph showing the numerical decline of the American church since the 1950s, there's one little blip upwards right at the mid-80s. Warren and his like also raised the bar for those of us in seminary or starting

ministry at that time. Warren's book became like a Bible to us, except that we read it more. We all dreamed of planting our own megachurch, because after all, if God had called us, didn't God want us to be *successful*?

Now, other countries had seen greater numerical declines in church long before it started here, but there's a reason that this response appeared in the United States. It is part of the American genius to reinvent, to think big, and to create not just a new *thing* but a whole new way of *doing* a thing. People like Daimler and Benz invented motorcars in Europe, but it was the American, Henry Ford, who invented the way to make them for everyone. And to make a vast fortune in the process. So, of *course* it was in America that church planters figured out reproducible techniques for making church for millions again. This is part of what makes America extraordinary – our pioneer spirit, our entrepreneurial bent, and the fervor of our drive to succeed.

Every gift has its dark side, though, and one problem with the drive for success is that you need concrete ways to measure success. In general, in America, we measure success in terms of money. We remember Henry Ford less for the brilliance of his mass production model as for how incredibly rich it made him. But measuring success in dollar signs is a bad fit for the church. It can be done, though. That's how we ended up with the "Prosperity Gospel," churches that teach that wealth is a sign of God's special favor, that God wants everyone to be rich, so you can have your *Best Life Now!* This, too, is an American phenomenon. Now, I'm not going to spend time on the Prosperity Gospel today. It is a festering cesspool of greed and hypocrisy, and when it pretends to be Christian it is blasphemous and fully deserving of the punishment it will receive. But in this sermon series, "Almost Christian," I'm talking about things that are positive and good and even appear to be Christian, but aren't quite. I'm talking about things that might be confused with genuine Christianity. The Prosperity Gospel is 100% the worship of wealth and has 0% to do with Jesus Christ, and it's not worth our time.

But I do want to talk today about another numerical measure of church success: membership and attendance. That *is* our default measure, isn't it? When pastors get together and we ask each other, "How's your church doing?" We mean, "Is your church growing?" And by "growing" we *don't* mean "Is your church's prayer life deepening? Are people being mentored in faith?" We mean, "How are your numbers?" In our own congregation, when we worry about our church, it always – *always* – comes out as worry about declining numbers (not about a decline in ministry or faith). Within our conference, there are basically two kinds of training offered to us pastors: a few are seminars on how to extract more money from existing congregations, but most are on new ways to get more people to join your church. Last June at Annual Conference I saw there was a seminar being offered on prayer, which was a nice change, so I went to it, and the first words out of the leader's mouth had to do with how this new prayer plan would increase membership. As if without that outcome there would be no point in praying. This is our measure of success.

But what's wrong with that? Why *wouldn't* we be looking for new ways to bring people in? The Great Commission sends us out to teach and baptize the world. Paul, in 2 Corinthians,

says “I am all things to all people, that by all means I might save some.” Are we supposed to sit on our hands and do nothing while church numbers drop? Wouldn’t Jesus *want* us to grow?

Well, that’s a fair question. What *would* Jesus want? Let’s look at how he conducted his own ministry on earth. He drew crowds, didn’t he? Well, yes. Luke 5:15-16: *Now more than ever the crowds would gather hear him and to be cured of their diseases. But he would withdraw to deserted places to pray.* This happens over and over. When the crowds gather, he slips away. In Mark 1, he slips away in the middle of the night, and his disciples go hunt for him to take him back to the crowds. When they find him, he says, “Let’s go on to the next town.” After he feeds 5000, the people want to make him king, but he disappears, leaving his disciples to dismiss the crowds. He seems unable to recognize opportunities to attract people. When he heals someone or does something amazing, what’s the first thing he does? He tells the person, “Now don’t tell anyone about this.” In Luke 9, three separate people come to Jesus wanting to join him, only to be told that following Jesus is hard and they shouldn’t take it lightly, and they all leave. In all Jesus’ ministry, he alienated all the people with influence who could have helped him and spent most of his time with outcasts and insignificant people who had zero to offer him in return. His disciples never really understood this – “Why are you spending so much time with children?” – but even his disciples were hardly the pick of the litter themselves – mostly uneducated, mostly lower class. And given that he spent so much time just with that small group, away from the crowds, it’s no wonder that when he died, rose again, then returned to the Father, they were all he left behind: twelve frightened disciples and a handful of women. I have a book in my office called *Ten Most Common Mistakes Made by New Church Starts*, and Jesus makes them all. By the criteria of that book, Jesus was the worst church planter in history. Frankly, it’s a little embarrassing how bad Jesus was at Christianity.

What was Jesus thinking? Well, apparently when he helped someone it wasn’t to attract that person to his group, but because that person needed help. Jesus seemed incapable of using others for his own goals. And evidently he had no interest in a large following of sort-of committed people. In fact, he regarded those people as a hindrance rather than a success, which is why he challenged them and drove them off. It seems that for Jesus, deeply and permanently transforming the lives of a few was more important than being popular with many.

Which leads me to the scripture we read before the sermon, the temptations of Christ. (You thought I’d forgotten it, didn’t you?) What are the temptations the devil offers? First, change stones into bread. “You can be comfortable! You don’t have to suffer! Just use your gifts for your own benefit!” Jesus declined. Second, power and influence. “You can rule the world! You can have all authority! I can grant it to you. What do you say?” Jesus said no. Third, to throw himself from the temple and be saved by the angels. “You can be spectacular! Everyone would be amazed! No one would ever be more admired, more popular!” Jesus said, “Go away.” Material comfort, influence, popularity. I’m not sure I could say that the American church has rejected any of these temptations.

I don’t mean to be harsh, because I struggle with this, too. I don’t mean to criticize the conference for being focused on numbers, because what else are they going to do? These are lean times for churches. Our conference has cut staff, and is resorting to a special financial appeal to

keep ministries afloat. More people in church would be really nice. And as a congregation we're still going to rejoice when we have good numbers and worry when we don't. The ministries that we do depend on our maintaining a viable institution. But here's what I wish we *could* do. I wish we could stop measuring our success in terms of numbers and start doing so in terms of individual stories. This week, for instance, through our Helping Hands fund, we helped a US vet pay his rent. His government job had disappeared for over a month and was not going to be reimbursed, and he needed help. That gift isn't going to help our numbers. I don't care. Jesus would have helped. Or here's one. Our Thursday morning men's Bible Study has a former regular who can't come any more, because he's sole caregiver for his incapacitated wife. So, one of our members has started taking notes, then going straight from the group to visit him and go over what we said. This is not going to increase our membership, our attendance, or our financial health. But Jesus would totally do that.

It is stories like this – and there are dozens more – that measure our faithfulness to Christ, not the annual statistical reports that we sent in this week. A church that worships success that is measured numerically – that church may do many good things and may look almost like a church of Jesus Christ. Almost. But not quite.

Final Word: There's a curious little bit of church jargon that I started hearing about ten years ago from pastors of megachurches. One of the innovations of these churches is that they pay much less attention to "membership" and more attention to attendance. So for them the key statistic is how many people show up to worship on weekends. Here's how they say it: "We worship ten thousand" "We worship twenty thousand." I know what they mean. I know it's just a verbal shorthand. But still . . . dude, we do not worship attendance numbers. This week, don't look for numbers. Look for people. Listen to their stories. Be a part of their stories. It's what Jesus did.