



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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Weights and Measures
Mark 10:32-45; Galatians 5:22-26

Have you ever had one of those harsh reality check kind of moments? You know, one of those times when you were convinced you were at the top of your game and thought you had life all figured out until, well, you realized you didn't?

A friend of mine, who shall remain anonymous, had one of those moments in a rather public way. One Friday morning nearly two decades ago, she gave birth to her fourth child. On Saturday morning, they were discharged from the hospital, and on Sunday morning, they were doing so well that she decided she could get the entire family ready and make it to church.

Although she did want to be at church, she now admits that a big part of her motivation was to impress everyone else, so on Sunday morning, she got herself dressed, got the older children (approximate ages 9, 5, and 3) ready to go, and got the newborn ready. She looked over the children and thought how adorable they all were, glanced in the mirror to see that she actually looked presentable for a woman who had given birth just two days before, and looked at the clock to realize they were even going to arrive early! She says she remembers thinking what a great accomplishment this was and how many people were going to be astounded at how she had everything under control.

She was feeling quite proud as the entire family entered the building and was immediately surrounded by people quick to offer their congratulations, say how great she looked, and wonder out loud how she could possibly have achieved all this. She could feel her shoulders rise and her chest puff out a little more with each compliment about what a caring, attentive, and organized mother she must be.

And then, just as the hall was filled with admirers and everyone's attention was on her, her three year old said, "Mommy, how old does the baby have to be before he can come to church with us, too?"

The family rushed back home to find the newborn just inside the doorway still safely sleeping in his car seat, but she decided maybe she wasn't quite so remarkable as she had previously imagined, and they did not return to church day.

Yes, it does seem that just about the time we start to believe that we are self-sufficient and in control and have things all figured out, the realities of life and our own limitations have a way of shattering our illusions.

Jesus' disciples must have known exactly what that experience feels like. Throughout their ministry with Jesus, especially as they are portrayed in Mark's Gospel, the Twelve often simply don't get it. They frequently can't comprehend Jesus' teachings, haven't grasped the meaning of his ministry, and despite his instructions, don't understand what they are called to do.

In Mark's Gospel, we find Jesus and his disciples, as they often did, traveling through the region of Judea, teaching and healing. Jesus would stop in a village or wherever he encountered someone in need to heal both their physical and spiritual sickness, to tell a parable that might offer a glimpse of life in God's Kingdom, or to answer a challenge from local Pharisees. Then, when they found a quiet moment to themselves or were traveling between villages, Jesus would offer his disciples deeper interpretations, sometimes even instructing them not to make his true identity known until the appointed time had come. But over and over again, we see a group of disciples, not becoming more enlightened or growing in depth and maturity of faith, but instead seeming bewildered and responding as if they had missed the point of Jesus' teachings altogether.

In today's Gospel Lesson, Jesus has just pulled his inner circle aside to tell them precisely what is going to happen to him when they arrive in Jerusalem, how he will be arrested, condemned, and killed but then will rise again. Brothers James and John, who are two of Jesus' closest friends and confidantes, respond by turning the focus on themselves, asking if Jesus will grant them places of honor when he is enthroned in his kingdom.

Their teacher and friend has just explained that he is about to be betrayed and executed, and their only concern seems to be securing their status before he is gone! Jesus first responds by asking them if they are willing to endure all that he is about to endure. They assure him that they are able, and indeed many of the Twelve will eventually be persecuted or even martyred for their faith. But then Jesus says that they have made a request that is not his to grant. As they do in so many other instances, James and John have clearly misunderstood Jesus' teachings here. We may be

tempted to shake our heads in surprise or even judgment at how far off the mark James and John find themselves, at how completely they have missed the point, until we recognize ourselves in their request. After all, James and John were among Jesus' closest friends and most faithful followers. They had worked hard and had given up much for their faith. Can we really blame them for asking for some kind of reward or recognition for all that they had sacrificed? Isn't that what's fair and how things are supposed to work?

In Rachel Held Evans' most recent book *Searching For Sunday*, which is the focus of our current weekly adult study groups, she reflects on the lessons learned from the apparent failure of the efforts she and a small group of friends made at starting a new church five years ago. She tells how this group of believers, many of whom had been hurt or become disillusioned by traditional churches, worked and gave and tried tirelessly to start what they called *The Mission*, only to see their numbers and resources dwindle until the ten who remained held a final service to share what their fellowship had meant to them before they closed the doors.

In thinking about their efforts, Evans reflects on the ways that we as individual believers and collectively as the Body of Christ have bought into our culture's definitions of success that are measured by numbers and growth and influence. She writes, "It's strange that Christians so rarely talk about failure when we claim to follow a guy whose three-year ministry was cut short by his crucifixion . . . Christians may need to get used to the idea of measuring significance by something other than money, fame, and power."¹

By almost any standard, we would likely judge *The Mission* to be what Evans calls "an epic fail." The attempt at planting a church lasted only a few months, included only a handful of people, and made only modest attempts at working with a couple of local ministries. They met in the parlor of a funeral home, and the one who served as their organizing pastor had to take a job at Wal-Mart to support his family. *The Mission* was far from what anyone would consider a success.

But then Evans asks us consider whether "success" is what the Church should be seeking. She says their group realized that perhaps it's not possible to build a church on nights and weekends, but that they had been church to one another. She points out that even their unsuccessful church plant managed to produce fruit of the Spirit along the way. She says, "We baptized, broke bread, preached the Word, and confessed our sins. We

¹Rachel Held Evans. *Searching For Sunday: Loving, Leaving, and Finding the Church*. Nelson Books: Nashville. 2015.

created a sanctuary where people told the truth without fear. We fed the hungry and filled out paperwork with the sick. We worked through our differences with care and grace. And we learned, perhaps the hard way, that church isn't static. It's not a building or a denomination or a 501(c)(3) organization. Church is a moment in time when the kingdom of God draws near, when a meal, a story, a song, an apology, and even a failure is made holy by the presence of Jesus among us and within us."²

Weighed on the scales of our culture, there is much about life in the church that may appear to be a failure. Measured by the world's yard sticks of money, fame, status, and power, the kingdom of God would often appear to be less than successful. But according to Jesus' teachings, indeed throughout the biblical witness, we are reminded that God values faithfulness instead of success, and obedience rather than achievement. God's people aren't called to produce bigger, better, or more powerful results and are not called to seek fame or wealth or status. In the passage we heard earlier, Paul reminds the Galatians, who were bickering about the standards that would make one worthy to be included in the Church, that they are not to become conceited or competitive or envious of one another. Instead, he says that the measure of value in God's Kingdom is bearing love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control. These fruits of the Spirit will not likely make us powerful, they won't win elections and probably won't gain millions of views on social media, but they will demonstrate our faithfulness to the commandment to love God with our whole selves. They will help us to live a life of compassion toward our neighbors. They will mold us more fully into the image of Christ whose name we bear.

I want to be clear that I don't think it's so much that money, fame, and power are inherently bad. Like all other resources, each of these can be used to accomplish good in the world, and each can open opportunities for ministry. I have often been grateful for faithful followers of Christ who happen to have financial resources, notoriety or influence, along with generous and compassionate hearts to use their gifts for good purposes.

But just as we see with James and John, and just as Paul saw among the Galatians, problems arise when we measure our worth based on these standards or when we judge others we perceive as failing to measure up. Problems arise when we are tempted to place our trust in these fleeting resources rather than relying wholly on the abundant and never-failing grace of the God who is the giver of every good gift we enjoy.

²Ibid.

There are so many voices calling us to measure ourselves, our ministries, our congregations by size or influence, by net worth or media hits. It becomes increasingly difficult, I believe, to resist the desire to compare ourselves to the church around the corner, to seek the kind of influence found in business or government, to believe the illusion that our hope and security can be found in financial investments. But the one whom we follow was born in a borrowed stable and died the death of a common criminal on a cross. Jesus spent his entire ministry rejecting any temptation to seek recognition or power for himself. He taught his disciples that the first must be last, that the greatest will be a servant to all, and that we must be willing to lose everything in order to find the abundant life God intends for us. God's Kingdom begins with the tiniest seeds of faith, is populated by fishermen and tax collectors and sinners who are not deemed worthy, and is fulfilled when the blind and lame and lepers and others who are excluded from polite society are welcomed to the feast.

There are so many voices telling us we don't quite measure up and so many temptations to believe that we have to be, not just successful, but the most successful because surely, as we find in nearly every other arena of life, there must be winners and losers in this game of faith, but the good news for us is the same as it was for James and John, the same as it was for the Galatians. The good news of the gospel is that whether or not we understand it or can live up to it, it is still good news for us and for all the world. The good news is that despite all our efforts to count up points and grade ourselves on a curve, despite all our attempts to prove that we are good enough to deserve a place of honor, and even after all the times we have tried to make others small so that we will feel bigger, Jesus says to us, "whoever wishes to be first must be the servant of all," and then sets his face toward Jerusalem for our sake and for the sake of the whole world.

And it is this good news of God's grace which can finally free us. It can free us from our need to evaluate and compare and compete. Free us from our fear of failure and our temptation to keep score. Free us to pray even when we don't have the perfect words, to ask questions because we can admit that we don't have all the right answers, and to be honest with one another and with ourselves about who we really are. The good news of God's grace for all of us—Yes, for all of us—is that we are free to open our arms and our hearts wide enough to love all our brothers and sisters, even and especially the ones who aren't successful or powerful or accomplished, and even to learn to love ourselves, not because we are good enough, but because any way we can measure it, we, too, are invited to take our place in God's kingdom. Thanks be to God! Amen.

We gather in this place week by week seeking your presence, O Lord, and often searching for answers, for community, for comfort, and for peace. We are called to a life of faith and discipleship, but sometimes your call demands more than we bargained for. The world would measure success and happiness by quantity: what is the biggest, the most, the best; and convince us that we can be masters of our own destiny. But Christ has called his followers to life in a kingdom that is like a hidden treasure, whose economy is measured by obedience and joy and compassion. Where the world tells us to do whatever we must to remain in control and get ahead, Jesus teaches that the last will be first, that the greatest faith grows from the tiniest of seeds, that true power is found in vulnerability, that those willing to give the most will, in turn, gain the whole world. O God, grant us the grace to hear your call above the flattery and deception of other messages that beckon to us, and give us the courage to follow you instead of chasing after attractions and accolades that are temporary. Make us attentive to the sound of your voice. Grant us wisdom to discern your truth. Give us endurance and creativity to work toward the vision of your kingdom.

We have only to look around us, O Lord, throughout this community and around our world, to see the needs that surround and sometimes overwhelm us. Images on the evening news are stark reminders of places where violence and corruption and oppression threaten to rob your children of life and security and freedom. We pray that you would make of us messengers of your peace. Even in our land where opportunities are available and resources are abundant, there are dark corners where poverty and hopelessness seem to reign. We pray that you would grant us generous and compassionate hearts in the face of such need. Among our own number there are many who are plagued by illness, crippled by grief or haunted by fear. We pray that you would empower us to bring healing and offer comfort. Within our own circle of friends and family, there are needs of body, mind and spirit which we want to meet but which leave us feeling depleted and helpless. We pray that you would enable us to offer words of hope and to share your love and mercy in ways that will bring assurance to these for whom we pray that they are not alone in their struggle. Grant to each of us, O Lord, grace for this day and hope for all our days to come. In the name of Jesus Christ our Lord and by the power of your Holy Spirit we pray. Amen.