

Things Human and Things Divine

**A Sermon by Pastor John W. Bengston
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What do we use as markers of success? I do not mean what you personally use, but what in our society are the markers of success?

I was intrigued by a video report that I watched on the computer monitor recently. The story was from Juno, Alaska, and featured was the winner of a national award called the Cool Runnings Contest. The company chosen as the 2009 winner is Alaska Zipline Adventures, located in Juno, Alaska. The company, started by a couple in 2006, was chosen for this award because they had been so successful in their new business venture. Briefly, a zipline is a cable strung between two large trees, and participants ride a seat suspended from the cable as they ride from one platform to another built high on huge trees. The experience gives each participant a new and different look at the Alaska rain forest and appeals to people who are concerned about ecology and thrilling ride.

This company had a successful first year in 2006 and business has grown at least 25% in each of the three succeeding years including 2009. The owners have connected with all the cruise lines that dock in Juno and make information about the Alaska Zipline Adventures available to all the passengers of the cruise ships. The company's website features pictures of travelers who have ridden the zipline plus rave reviews offered by those who have joined in the fun of ziplining.

The commentator summarizes the story at the end by commending the entrepreneurs for first, their inspiration, second their persistence, and third their social and electronic networking all of which have produced this very economically successful venture.

Now there is an example of success which, in our cultural definition, results in economic gain. When we deem someone successful, it is often a recognition of one's occupational achievements – "she has 100 people working under her." Or one's financial power – "he now manages a \$30,000,000 budget for the company."

Scripture offers us not another answer, but a different question? What are the marks of faithfulness?

We have been reading from the Gospel of Mark in the last year and have read a good portion of that Gospel in our worship services. The readings continue today, as the Gospel for today is from Mark 12. In previous Sundays we've read about caring for sick people, resisting evil and temptation, the priority of doing God's will, discipleship and its requirements, facing persecution, declaring Jesus only as Savior, being servants not being served, the false allure of wealth and riches, the supremacy of loving God and neighbor.

How does that description compare with our description of being successful? Admittedly, there are a few similarities: dedication and hard work. More glaring differences arise: serve others with the expectation of personal economic benefit compared to serving others without thought of reward; people as potential customers compared to people as brothers and sisters; accomplishing goals I set for myself as compared to doing the will of the Lord.

I find myself continually challenged to discern the differences between success and faithfulness, between defining what appears good and what is God's. Remember how Peter reacted, as recorded in Mark, after Jesus first said he would be rejected and killed? Peter "rebuked" Jesus, but then Jesus said to Peter, "You are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things" (Mark 8:33). Many times, I am not sure that I have my mind always set on divine things as Christ calls me to do. In fact, I am quite sure I do not. How about you? Are you able to keep your mind set on divine things? Ideas about success can easily crowd out Christ's call to faithfulness. All those ideas of success are not terrible – get an education, own the place in which you live, save for the future. Discerning when those ideas take over and become our priority is challenging.

Just the other day, I read a column of by a financial adviser by the name of Liz Pulliam Weston in which she wrote that one of the first basics of personal financial planning is: live within your means and pay yourself first. Sounds good, doesn't it. What about the Scriptural message of first fruit giving – give to God first, not give to yourself first. What may sound good from a human point of view contradicts the divine point of view. You and I are called to discern the difference daily, over and over again.

In the first reading today from 1 Kings and in the Gospel, we encounter two widows, both of whom are living on the very edge of life. In 1 Kings, the reading described a widow who had only enough flour and oil left to make one loaf of bread. As we heard read, she was sure that this was it, that when she made this last loaf, she and her son would eat it and then die because there was no more to eat. Elijah, the prophet of the Lord told this woman – not an Israelite, a foreigner who worshiped Baal – to go ahead and make that loaf, but then give it to him. If she did, Elijah said, the Lord God of Israel will not let your jar of flour and jug of oil will never become empty. Now there's a choice! Give away the last bit of food you have in your hands, or eat it yourself.

In the Gospel, we read again about the widow who put in her only coins for her Temple offering. What an act of faith. These two widows provide examples of trusting the Word of the Lord. Do I trust like that? Am I suppose to? Are you?

In my mind is a vivid memory of a meal with Terry and Michele Finseth, their then 11 year old son and 6 year old daughter, the evening before they left Aurora, Colorado, to being serving as full time volunteers with Habitat for Humanity International in the Solomon Islands. This couple, members of Christ the Savior Lutheran Church, Aurora, when I served that congregation, gave up a very comfortable life – new house, a Porsche for him and an Audi station wagon for her – to seek greater fulfillment and purpose in life

through serving others – totally. At that dinner, I said to them, “What you are preparing to do is what I have preached about, but I have been unable to do. You’re commitment makes me feel embarrassed.”

Terry’s gracious response was, “If you had not done what you did in preaching and teaching, we would not be making this step. You are supposed to be here doing what you’re doing.” We will not all respond the same way; We cannot all respond alike, but we are all to keep asking: is my mind on things human or divine, and Lord, help me to know the difference. Lord Jesus, forgive me for being unable to always think of things divine. Thank you for your grace that accepts, cleanses, reassures, and re-directs me every day. You are merciful, and I am grateful. Amen.