Palm Sunday, March 31, 1996
WHEN FAILURE BECOMES SUCCESS
Matthew 21:1-11

There's an old saying we've all heard: "Nothing succeeds like success." However, like many old sayings, it's not always true. In fact, there's good evidence to support the opposite idea: "Nothing fails like success." When individuals, companies, or institutions become very successful in terms of customers, products, or services, they tend to become complacent, resistant to change, and fail to see new opportunities and emerging trends.

Now, don't get me wrong — there's nothing inherently bad about wanting or achieving success, as long as you are aware of its temptations and dangers, and as long as your success is attained ethically.

The people of Israel, especially those who came to Jerusalem to celebrate the Passover, were hungry for national success. For too long, their nation had been demeaned by the occupying forces of the Roman Empire, stripped of their right to self-determination. The Passover holiday itself was a time to remember their earlier success when Moses led their ancestors out of slavery in Egypt to a new land.

They remembered the glorious days when David was king and their enemies were defeated, when their nation was a power to be respected. After David, Solomon built the great temple that became the center of their religious devotion. But now, for too long, they had been deprived of their dignity as an independent people. Many were ready for a revolution. They longed for the One who would lead them to throw out the Romans. Didn't the prophets point to a day when an anointed One of God, a king greater than David, would come?

Maybe Jesus was that One. They had heard of his miracles, even stories that he had raised a man named Lazarus from the dead.

So when Jesus rode into Jerusalem, they treated him like royalty, spreading their coats and palm branches on the road before him. Joyous shouts filled the air as the hopeful procession moved toward the city. The crowd proclaimed Jesus as King. After all, who could resist the Anointed One of God? What could Caesar do in the face of someone who came with the power of the Almighty? Surely, with God on his side, Jesus would inevitably win whatever contest might arise.

It's a popular theme — the right leader will save us. We see this belief at work, especially in politics. Over and over again, we want to believe that if only our candidate is elected, they will solve all our problems — reduce taxes, lower the crime rate, solve the drug problem, put enemies in their place, and make everything right. It's a tempting dream, but often based on the assumption that the right leader needs the kind of power that comes from military strength to destroy the enemies.

This is not to deny the importance of good leadership. Creative, innovative leaders with vision are crucial for any institution or nation to succeed, but no leader can do it all alone. And more than raw power is needed. Some types of success are only temporary and lead to failure in the long run, and sometimes what we interpret as failure can lead to success. What we think of as success might even be failure in God's terms.

Jesus understood this better than anyone. He wasn't fooled by the crowd's praise and joy, but he didn't try to stop their singing either, even though he knew their popularity was fragile. The hosannas around him were shouts of the right words, but for the wrong reasons: "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord!" It's easy for us to shout that if we think God is going to do what we want.

According to the Gospel of Luke, when Jesus drew near and heard the crowds as he entered Jerusalem, he wept over the city, saying, "If only you knew today the things that make for peace, but now they are hidden from your eyes." Jesus knew the people were blinded by a false vision of success in God's eyes. The truth of God's way was present, but the crowd missed it. Instead of riding into the city on a proud horse, Jesus chose a humble, borrowed donkey, a beast of burden.

Consider the symbolism of that borrowed donkey. Earlier, Jesus had told his disciples to go into a nearby town and borrow a donkey, saying, "If anyone asks why, tell them I need it."

It's worth noting that Jesus seemed to borrow almost everything he needed. As far as we know, he owned very little. He borrowed the water he turned into wine, the stone jars to store the wine, boats to get away, houses to eat, sleep, teach, and heal in. He borrowed the upper room for the Last Supper, was born in a borrowed manger, and buried in a borrowed tomb. Perhaps he was teaching us that everything we have is on loan from God. To see ourselves as borrowers is to recognize that we live by grace and have no claim upon God except the one God gives us: "The Lord gives; the Lord takes away. Blessed be the name of the Lord."

A teacher on a borrowed donkey — what kind of power is that? A few days later, when Jesus stood before Pontius Pilate, the Roman governor, Pilate asked with amusement, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Pilate probably thought, "Here you stand, beaten and ragged, with no evidence of royalty. You have no weapons or army. How can you be king of anything? You're a failure."

And yet, while Pilate is long gone, the movement Jesus leads is alive and worldwide.

Jesus before Pilate reminds me of Gandhi appearing in Buckingham Palace for tea, dressed in his simple homespun loincloth. When asked if he thought he was underdressed, Gandhi replied, "His Majesty had enough clothes for both of us." Like Jesus, Gandhi had no army or weapons.

Jesus was a failure in the way Rome understood success. He was a failure in the way the religious leaders of his time defined it, and in the way we often define it too. From the world's perspective, success means power, wealth, prestige, status, and fame.

In the insightful study Habits of the Heart, Robert Bellah and his colleagues observed that the American dream is often a very private one—"to be the star, the uniquely successful one who stands out from the crowd of ordinary people."

Success, as we often define it, is measured by winning. Losers are rarely considered successful. Winning is one form of success, and there's nothing wrong with that, but not everything in life can be judged by winning or losing.

Years ago, when LaGuardia was mayor of New York City, he launched the City Center of Music and Drama, but never attended a ballet performance. When asked why, he replied, "I

like to keep score, and with ballet, I never know who's ahead." Some people see life this way — they only care about who's ahead, who's winning, and who's losing.

But there are parts of life, like relationships, that don't follow the rules of keeping score. Some people forsake relationships entirely — relationships with others, with God, even with themselves — because they can't measure success in those terms.

Palm Sunday and the events of Holy Week show us that God doesn't define success the way we do. God doesn't keep score by counting winners and losers. In fact, when there are losers, God is usually on their side.

Someone once asked church historian Martin Marty what he thought God was doing in the upheavals of history. Marty replied, "I don't speak for God, but from the Bible we learn that humans are not as in control of history as we like to think, and that when we write history in terms of winners and losers, we usually get it wrong." He then quoted Psalm 2:4, "When nations are in turmoil, God sits in the heavens and laughs."

From a biblical perspective, the successful nation, according to God, is one that works for justice and peace, one that protects and helps the losers in its midst, one that feeds the hungry, clothes the naked, and shelters the homeless. That's not how we typically define success.

When the first space shuttle launched, it was an exhilarating moment. The President of the United States sent a message to the astronauts: "You go in the hand of God." But then he added, "Through you today, we all feel like giants again." The implication was that before this event, we had felt insignificant as a nation. "Once again," he said, "we feel the surge of pride that comes from knowing we are the first and the best."

It's natural to want to feel like we're the first and the best. But this kind of success is fleeting and, in the long run, has little to do with success in God's eyes.

When life is viewed through the lens of the gospel, it becomes clear that what the world calls success often looks like failure. But even when we fail in the eyes of others, our loss can be gain before God. No one is a loser from God's perspective.

That's what Palm Sunday and Holy Week are all about — God entering our world in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus, giving hope to the weak, healing to the hurting, and taking on the suffering of the world.

The crucifixion of Jesus, which seemed like defeat and failure, is at its heart the most enduring victory and success in history. And from that apparent defeat, God continues to bring forth healing and help. Amen.