Sunday March 31, 1996

WHEN FAILURE BECOMES SUCCESS Matthew 21:1-11

An old saying, frequently heard is, "Nothing succeeds like success." However like many old sayings, it's not always true. In fact, there's good evidence to support an opposite bit of wisdom, "Nothing fails like success." When individuals, companies, or other institutions become very successful in terms of customers, products, and/or services, they tend to become complacent and resistant to change and fail to see new opportunities and emerging trends.

Lest you misunderstand, there's inherently nothing wrong with

wanting to be successful or in becoming successful as long as you are aware of its temptations and dangers and assuming that your attainment of success has been done ethically.

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

They also remembered the glorious days when David was king. Then their enemies were defeat-

ed. Their nation was a power to be respected. King David was followed by Solomon who built the temple which had become the center of their religious devotion. For too long now they had been deprived of their dignity as an independent people. Many among them were ready for a revolution. They longed for the coming of the One who would lead them in the fight to throw out the Romans. After all didn't the prophets point to a day when there would appear an anoi-
nted One of God, a king greater even than David?

Maybe Jesus was the One of whom the prophets had spoken. They had heard of his miracles. There was even a story circulating through the crowds that he had raised a man named Lazarus from the dead.

So when Jesus rode into Jerusalem, they gave him the royal treatment, paving the road with their coats and with palm branches. Joyous shouts filled the air as the hopeful procession moved toward Jerusalem. Jubilantly the people proclaimed Jesus, King. Who can resist the anointed of God? What can Caesar do in the face of One who comes in the power of the Almighty? With God on his side, Jesus would be the inevitable winner in whatever contest might develop.

The right leader will save us. It's a popular theme. A tribe or nation or some other collection of people, perhaps a city or town is in trouble. The bad people are in control. There is no one available to throw the bad people out. Then the hero or heroine arrives and almost single-handed, the enemy is defeated.

We can see this belief at work especially in politics. Over and over again we want to believe that if only our candidate is elected, he or she will be able to put all things back in order. Taxes will be reduced, the crime rate will go down, the drug problem will be solved. Whoever the enemies are, they will be put in their place or killed and everyone will live happily ever after. It's a tempting dream. This kind of dream is usually based on the assunmption that in addition to the right leader, the leader needs the kind of power that comes from military strength so that the enemies can be destroyed.

This is not in any way to deny the importance of good leadership. Creative and innovative leaders with vision are crucial for any institution or nation to succeed in the best sense of that term, but no

leader can do it all alone.

In addition, more than raw power is necessary. Not only that, some kinds of success are only temporary and lead to failure in the long run and what we sometimes interpret as failure can lead to success. Futhermore, what we sometimes think of as success according to our definition is failure in God's terms.

Jesus knew this above all and as a result he was not fooled by the praise and joy of the crowd. On the other hand, he did not try to stop their singing and shouting although he knew that this kind of popularity was fragile. The hosannas which rang around him were shouts of the right words for the wrong reasons: "blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord." It's easy

for us to shout, "Blessed is the one who comes in the name of God," if we think God is going to do what we want God to do.

The Palm Sunday parade as remembered by the Gospel of Luke, says that when Jesus drew near and heard the crowds as he entered the city of Jerusalem, he wept over it, saying, "Would that even today you knew the things that make for peace, but now they are hid from your eyes." Jesus knew that the people in the crowd were blinded by a false vision of success as far as God's ways are concerned.

The truth of God's way was present, but the crowds missed it. Instead of entering the city riding on a proud horse, Jesus had chosen instead a humble, borrowed donkey, used in those times a beast of burden. His choice of transpor-

tation was itself a contrast to the kind of success that was in the mind of the people who greeted him.

Consider the symbolism in a borrowed donkey. Earlier, Jesus had told several of his disciples, "Go into the little town near Jerusalem and borrow a donkey and if anyone questions you, tell them that I need it."

It's instructive 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. He borrowed the stone jars in which the wine was stored. He borrowed a boat now and then to get away. He borrowed houses in which to eat, sleep, teach and heal. He borrowed the upper room in which he ate the last

supper with his friends. He was born in a borrowed manger and buried in a borrowed tomb. Maybe he was teaching us that all that we have is on loan from God. To see ourselves as borrowers is to recognize ourselves as those who live by grace, who have no claim upon God except the one that God gives to 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 appeared before the Roman governor of Judea, Pontius Pilate, it was probably with some amusement that Pilate asked Jesus, "Are you the king of the Jews?" Pilate was probably thinking to himself, "Here you stand before me, beaten and ragged; you have no evidence of royalty; you

have no weapons or army to lead; how can you be king of anything? All you are is a failure."

If Pilate were alive today, what would he see? Jesus never attempted to overthrow the Roman Empire by leading an armed revolution. But today the movement which he leads is alive and world-wide while the Roman Empire is dead.

Jesus standing before Pilate reminds me of Gandhi of India, appearing in Buckingham Palace one day for tea while he was in the midst of trying to lead India out from under the rule of the British Empire and as usual in addition to being a small man, was dressed in his simple, homespun cotton loin cloth and shawl with his dollar pocket watch suspended by a safety pin from his waist. The people in power wondered what kind of

leader he could be--he had no army or weapons. A reporter asked him later, "Don't you think you were a trifle under-dressed for the occasion?" Gandhi answered, "His majesty had enough clothes on for both us us."Pilate was right. Jesus was a failure in the way in which Rome understood success and he was a failure in the way in which the religious leaders of his time defined success and in the way we usually define it as well. The usual criteria of success from the world's point of view are always of the order of appearances: power, wealth, prestige, status, fame.

In their insightful study of American life, published in the book, HABITS OF THE HEART, Robert Bellah and his colleagues observed, "The American dream is often a very private dream of being

the star, the uniquely successful and admirable one, the one who stands out from the crowd of ordinary folks."

Above all, to be successful in the way in which the world usually understands success, one has to win. Losers are rarely thought of as being successful. Certainly winning is one form of success in this world and I'm not saying that it's bad to win--only that there are some things in life that cannot be judged as being a success or a failure in terms of winning or losing.

Many years ago when LaGuardia was mayor of New York City, he launched New York's City Center of Music and Drama, but he never attended the ballet there. Someone asked him why not, since he otherwise seemed to be a supporter

of art. He replied, "I'm a guy who likes to keep score. With ballet, I never know who's ahead." Some of us seem to think of life only in terms of keeping score. We want to know who's ahead and who's losing.

There are some things in life however which do not lend themselves to keeping score. Relationships, for example, have a way of refusing to go by the numbers. That's why some people end up forsaking relationships altogether-- relationships to others, to God and even with themselves. Unless they can keep score and know who's ahead, they do not even want to be part of the event.

Palm Sunday and the events of Holy Week which follow--the last supper Jesus had with his disci-

ples on Maundy Thursday, his arrest and trial and then crucifixion on Good Friday and the resurrection on Easter Sunday, all tell us that God does not define success in the same way as we usually define it. God does not keep score in terms of winners and losers. And when there are losers in life, we tend to find God on their side.

Someone once asked Martin Marty what he saw happening as a church historian in the reversals, the topsy-turvy situations, the crumbling of empires and ideologies in Eastern Europe and other places and what did he think God was doing in these events? Marty replied, "I don't speak for God, or know much about God's point of view, except as I get glimpses from the scriptures. From God's point of view as seen in the Bible, the first thing one learns is that humans are not

as much in control of history as we like to think we are, and that if we assume we are and write history in terms of winners and losers, we usually misinterpret history." And then Dr. Marty quoted Psalm 2:4, "when nations are in turmoil, and the peoples hatch their futile plots and princes conspire together, then God sits in the heavens and laughs."

Again, from the Biblical perspective, the "successful" nation according to God's standards, is one which works for justice and peace; one which protects and helps the losers in its midst; one which feeds the hungry and clothes the naked and gives shelter to the homeless. But that's not the way in which we usually define success.

When the first space shuttle got off the ground

years ago it was a thrilling sight. The President of the United States sent a message to the space-bound astronauts: "You go in the hand of God." That was modest enough, but he went on: "Through you today we all feel as giants again." The implication was that before this event, we had been feeling insignificant and unsuccessful as a nation. Then the President added, "Once again we feel the surge of pride that comes from knowing we are the first and the best."

Maybe everyone wants to feel that they are the first and the best and in one sense that's okay. And if we can't do it ourselves, we can always experience it vicariously through others who we consider winners and successful.

At the same time however, we need to remember

that this kind of success is fleeting and that in the long run it has little to do with success as far as God is concerned.

When life in this world is viewed in the light of the gospel, it becomes clear that the best success can appear as failure. Even when we fail in the eyes of other people, 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 birth, life, death and resurrection of Jesus and in so doing giving hope to the weak, healing the hurt and taking on the suffering of the world.

The crucifixion of Jesus which looked like a de-feat and failure is at its center the most enduring

victory and success in history. And from this defeat, God is still bringing forth healing and help. Amen.