Palm Sunday, April 5, 1998
MOMENTARY SUCCESS
Luke 19:28-40

All of our lives are filled with successes and failures, and the life of Jesus was no exception.

When he entered Jerusalem on the day we now call Palm Sunday, his followers greeted him as a hero. From all outward appearances, it was the high point of his ministry. He was getting the acclaim he deserved. Exactly what went on in the mind of Jesus during this brief demonstration, we will never know, except that he made no attempt to discourage the accolades. He graciously accepted the acclaim of the crowd.

However, some of the community leaders in the crowd were not impressed but angry. They asked Jesus to order his followers to stop the celebration. He refused and said, "I tell you that if these people were silent, the stones would shout out."

He knew that spontaneous celebrations like this one could not be arbitrarily ended. When people are in a festive mood, they can't be stopped by a simple command. At the same time, he knew that any festive hero's welcome is only momentary and will come to its own end.

Even though the crowd welcomed him as a king, he was not a king in the usual sense of the word. He had no throne, no army, no royal symbols. He wore no crown and did not carry a sword. He had no political ambitions whatsoever, and a few days later, when he stood before Pilate and Pilate asked him if he was King of the Jews, he tried to make clear what kind of king he was by saying, "My Kingdom is not of this world."

On the other hand, we also know that from the very beginning of his public ministry, people recognized in him a special quality. He exhibited a powerful spiritual presence. When he taught and spoke, people listened. They sensed in him a unique spiritual authority.

But again, not all people who came into contact with him were impressed in the same way. Many saw him only as another wandering preacher, a bit unusual, strange in his ideas, and they were certain that he would be forgotten in the next few years or sooner.

For Jesus, the reception on Palm Sunday was a momentary success. That didn't bother him, nor should it surprise us. He had had momentary successes before. There were individuals who said they would follow him and did so for a time, but then fell away. This didn't surprise him. He healed people and they were impressed and grateful, but soon after forgot all about him. His life was filled with temporary successes and defeats.

Some people followed him but misunderstood his teachings. Even his own family had their doubts in the beginning, and the religious leaders of the day excluded him from their gatherings. His closest disciples did not always catch on to what he was saying until after he had been killed and then, a few days later, experienced him as their risen Savior. And one of his trusted disciples betrayed him, and another denied ever knowing him.

How was it possible for him to handle his momentary successes and failures with such equanimity? What can we learn from him in dealing with our momentary successes and passing defeats?

First, Jesus lived from the inside out. He knew what he stood for. He had a strong sense of what God's will was for him. And he had a prayer life that kept him constantly in touch with the source of all spiritual power — God. He also knew that this life is only temporary while life with God after this life is eternal. He had an eternal perspective.

I usually don't pay much attention to bumper stickers and refuse to allow any kind on my car. But sometimes I see one that impresses me. The other day I saw a bumper sticker that said, "If you don't stand for something, you'll fall for anything."

As I drove on, it caused me to think again about what things I stand for. Think about it. What are some of the principles on which you base your life? Our deepest convictions become a mirror of the values and priorities in our everyday decisions. "Choose your battles wisely," an old friend of mine who had been in the ministry for many years told me. "It isn't possible to fight for everything."

That commendable quality in ourselves is what we call bullheadedness in others. But on the positive side, we all know that deeply held convictions are the mainsprings of action, the driving power of life. They give us steadiness and direction. They help us to deal successfully with life's ups and downs.

Because of Jesus' deep convictions and his abiding faith in the power, goodness, and love of God, he could handle both momentary successes and passing failures. When people highly praised him, he did not become overly proud, and when they reviled him, he did not revile in return. His trust was based on the strength of his own inner character and in the power of God, who judges justly. He lived from the inside out.

Too many people, however, do the opposite and live from the outside in. Then praise or any momentary success gives them an over-inflated sense of elation, which usually doesn't last very long and only causes us to want more and more of it. Criticism and failure can depress us more than it should because it only confirms our own secret shaky opinion of ourselves.

When we lack spiritual depth, which comes from a determined faith, we let the world determine whether we shall be rude or gracious, elated or depressed. We become "other-directed" people because our behavior is primarily based on how others are treating us, and we are no longer in charge of our own character.

The story of Palm Sunday tells us that life can be lived courageously and joyfully when our inner life is based on a strong and vital faith in God, rather than having our inner worth depend on the opinions and approval of others or on life's momentary successes or failures.

It's sometimes called living with a sense of "detachment." In today's world, "detachment" has lost most of its positive connotation. It is used most often in a negative sense to mean the opposite of a healthy engagement with the world and with other people. It conveys a sense of aloofness that signifies a lack of concern for others.

But there is another understanding of "detachment." In our spiritual lives, it means not allowing either worldly values or self-centeredness to distract us from what is most essential in our relationship with God and with each other.

This sort of detachment is neither passive nor indifferent to the world. It is not resignation but a vigilance that allows a person to recognize that whatever comes is a gift from God. It does not mean to be “above it all,” but it recognizes that one shares a common lot with others.

Like Jesus, we can creatively handle life’s momentary successes and failures when we remember that our worth and lovability are unrelated to others’ approval or disapproval. God never intended us to be imprisoned by the narrow confines of someone else’s opinion. The call to discipleship is a call to freedom as we are released to move beyond our momentary successes or failures.

Second, Jesus was thankful for and able to enjoy the momentary success, recognition, and celebration that took place on Palm Sunday, even though he knew it was temporary because he knew at the same time that God and God’s love are eternal.

The world we live in continues to have its momentary successes and failures, yet we need not give up hope. We know that God’s ways are not our ways. Even though we live in a world where power politics, aggression, suspicion, hate, violence, and greed are still very much present, God is still at work.

In the meantime, we can see the momentary successes of our own time as little breaks of light in the darkness of the world. Sometimes they are seen in one person, and at other times in a group or movement that brings change for the better into our lives.

Here’s an example from church history. In the year 1210, a little man without a single possession in the world and without a penny to his name, but with an incredible spirit, stood before the Pope in Rome and asked for permission to begin what he wanted to call the “Order of the Poor Little Brothers.” Everybody told him when he went to Rome on this mission that it was hopeless, that the Pope would never consent to such an order, that there had never been such a society of Christian people based on anything like the severe requirements on which the proposed order was to be based, and that this little man, so stripped of all signs of power, this Italian from Assisi standing before the Pope in his power and his majesty, would be completely lost and defeated before he began.

But Francis of Assisi returned with his request granted. That was a time in the world and in the church of confusion and chaos, and yet there broke into the world and the church this singing free spirit that had been captivated by Christ and temporarily, at least, triumphed over every power that was raised against it.

That kind of momentary success has been repeated again and again through the history of the world and the church, and especially by people who live from the inside out.

But can these momentary successes of Jesus be anything but momentary? Are we to be satisfied with these spotty, occasional victories of the Spirit of Christ in the world?

The successes in our world may always seem to be only temporary, but I do know that God triumphs in individual lives over and over again, and that gives me hope.

I also know that these momentary successes are more frequent than we sometimes think. What a list we could make if we had knowledge of all the ordinary women and men who, in the midst of confusion and the problems of everyday life, live in the Spirit of Jesus and triumph over seemingly insurmountable problems.

For example, I think of a young woman, twenty-three years old who has had an operation on her spine. After months of suffering, with the future still uncertain, she is still so radiant and so full of life and faith as she lies there perfectly still, unable to move and the people who go in to see her are inspired with her triumph of spirit.

These successes are more frequent than any of us can imagine and every one of them offsets a hundred defeats. That of course does not minimize the seriousness of the defeat, but it is true that one such success does minimize the failures that have surrounded us for years.

In the same way, one individual who does will win an election, or bring personal wealth will roll back the clouds of darkness for days to come.

One person, no matter how obscure she may be, who is willing to let the Spirit of Christ work in her, the spirit of goodwill and honesty, will offset a thousand defeats that scoundrels, rascals and sinners have made. And that obscure person can be you if you will like Jesus, live from the inside out. This is what gives me hope day after day.

The foundation of all our hope is this: in every success, whether it be momentary or longer-lasting, whether it be in a group, or in a movement for freedom, or in an individual, we see transparently the power of God at work, empowering the weak, scorning the powerful, healing the hurt. And this power of God is never momentary but eternal and in the long run always triumphs. Amen.