Sunday, July 8, 2001
THE REWARDS OF FAITHFULNESS
Luke 10:1-11

Success and failure frequently are two sides of the same coin. Jesus knew this from personal experience. Despite being a superb teacher with many successes, he also experienced failures. Some people misunderstood his teachings. Others followed him for the wrong reasons. One of his closest followers betrayed him, and another denied knowing him when under pressure. His critics thought he wasted too much time with children and with people who were marginalized.

Thus, when Jesus sent some of his followers ahead to visit towns and villages to spread his ministry, he told them they too would encounter both success and failure. According to Luke's account, he said, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; I am sending you out as lambs in the midst of wolves… When the people welcome you, tell them that God's love is in the world and in their midst. And when you are rejected, when you fail, move on."

It's good advice, not only for telling people about God and God's love, but in every aspect of our lives. No one is successful one hundred percent of the time. No one bats 1.000. But if you are faithful in what you are called to do, your faithfulness will be rewarded. Success will come, and often in places you hadn't expected.

This advice, which Jesus gave to his followers as he sent them out two by two, reminds me of his parable of the sower, which carries the same theme. He said, and I'm paraphrasing, "I have come to sow God's love among you. I have brought the seed, and it is good seed. You, my followers, are also to be sowers of this good seed. It is your job to scatter this seed as broadly as possible. But remember, some of the seed you sow will be trampled on, or the birds will eat it. Some will fall on rocky ground and will not take root because there is no depth of soil. Some will fall among weeds and be choked out. But if you sow faithfully, some seed will fall into good soil and yield a hundredfold. And you, the sowers, cannot always tell the good soil from the bad."

You can make the mistake of over-analyzing the soil before you sow any seed, or over-analyzing a situation instead of taking appropriate action. A man fell into a pit and couldn't get himself out. A subjective person came along and said, "It's logical that someone would fall down there." A self-pitying person said, "You haven't seen anything until you've seen my pit." An optimist said, "Things could be worse." A pessimist said, "Things will get worse." Jesus, seeing the man, took him by the hand and lifted him out of the pit.

Everyday life is filled with success and failure, but success outweighs failure if you are faithful in doing what you are called to do.

This truth is illustrated in many ways in everyday life. Take baseball, for example. Baseball players who hit the most home runs also have the most strikeouts. Babe Ruth struck out 1,330 times, a record in futility not equaled by any other player in baseball history. But that's not what we remember about him. His 714 home runs overshadowed the 1,330 strikeouts.

Cy Young, one of baseball's greatest pitchers, had 511 victories. What is generally forgotten is that he lost almost as many games as he won.

Honus Wagner is generally considered one of the best baseball players of all time. For years, he was the idol of fans and players alike. One year, he was voted the most valuable player in the league. He also led the league in errors. The reason? He went after every ball that came into his territory. People who have no mistakes, errors, or failures in life are often those who have few successes.

In my first parish in the 1950s on the south side of Chicago, one of the church members was a successful Fuller Brush salesperson. Those were the days when salespeople would go house to house every day. I asked him one day what the secret to his success was. He said, “It’s no secret. If I make 40 or 50 calls per day, it’s almost guaranteed that I’m going to make a good living. But if I stop after the first 10 calls in the morning because I haven’t made a sale, I would never succeed. It’s impossible to predict in advance which homes will result in good sales. I’m constantly surprised.”

There are activities in life where our successes and failures cannot be measured as easily or statistically as in baseball or sales. I know that’s true of the sermons I preach.

It’s hard to tell sometimes whether a sermon is a home run or a strikeout or an error. There are even times when I wonder if all the time I spend preparing sermons has any effect on anyone. I’m sure that some of you have the same questions.

I know this because I remember reading a letter to the editor of a church newspaper in which the writer said: “It seems that ministers feel their sermons are very important and spend a great deal of time preparing them. I’ve been attending church regularly for the past thirty years, and I have probably heard three thousand sermons. To my consternation, I discovered that I cannot remember a single sermon that I’ve heard. Couldn’t this time be more profitably spent on something else?”

Several weeks went by, and then another letter appeared in the same newspaper that gave me some hope. The writer said: “I have been married for more than thirty years. During that time, I have eaten 32,850 meals, many of them prepared by my wife. Suddenly, I have discovered that I cannot remember the exact menu of any one of them. But I have the feeling that without them, I would have starved to death long ago.”

Life is like that. Unlike baseball, in many of your endeavors, you don’t always know when you’ve hit a home run or when you’ve struck out. But as Jesus pointed out, if you live faithfully by extending a hand to others, your faithfulness will be rewarded.

Listen to this letter to Ann Landers: “Mark was walking home from school when he noticed the boy ahead of him had tripped and dropped all of his books, along with two sweaters, a baseball bat, a glove, and a tape recorder. Mark helped the boy pick up the scattered items. Since they were going in the same direction, Mark helped carry the burden. He learned the boy’s name was Bill, that he liked video games, baseball, and history, that he was having trouble in school, and that he had just broken up with his girlfriend. When they arrived at Bill’s home, Mark was invited in for a soda and to watch television. The afternoon passed pleasantly with a few laughs and some small talk.”

“The boys continued to see each other around school and had lunch together several times. They ended up at the same high school, where they had brief contacts over the years. Finally, the long-awaited senior year came, and three weeks before graduation, Bill asked Mark if they could talk.”

“Bill reminded him of the day years before when they had first met. ‘Did you ever wonder why I was carrying so much stuff home from school that day?’ he asked. ‘I cleaned out my locker because I didn’t want to leave a mess for anyone else. I had saved up a couple of dozen of my mother’s sleeping pills and was going to commit suicide. But after we had such a good time together, I realized that if I killed myself, I would have missed all that fun and so many other good times that might follow. You see, Mark, when you picked up my books that day, you did a lot more. You saved my life.’”

Faithfulness is rewarded in so many ways, not all of them quite that dramatic. A small congregation in a rural area prided itself on being a training ground for seminary students ministering in their church. While interviewing one of the candidates, a member of the search committee mentioned the former pastors who had gone on to serve in prominent capacities — one as president of a seminary and pastor of a large city church, another as a seminary president, and a third as presiding officer of two denominational conventions. “How in the world did you find that many potentially great people in this little church?” the astonished candidate asked. “Find them?” said the committee member. “We didn’t find them. We made them.”

When I was working as a part-time student minister in Connecticut while attending seminary, one of my regular visits was to a member of the parish who was in the hospital because of a series of brain tumors. She had survived several operations and was trying to recover from another one. There was little hope, if any, that she would recover. I visited her week after week and month after month, always trying to be sensitive to her needs and having a brief prayer with her. She did not often visibly respond or talk very much. At the end of the summer, she died. I was discouraged, not because she died, but because in all of my visits she had not been very responsive and didn’t seem to care whether I visited her or not. A few months after that, I moved away. The next Christmas, I received a letter from her husband, expressing how much my visits to his wife had meant to her, how they had prepared her for death, and how they had helped him. I had counted my efforts a failure, but they were not. Faithfulness has its rewards.

When Jesus sent his followers out to tell people the good news of God’s love, in addition to reminding them that they would experience failure and success, but that overall they would be rewarded for their faithfulness, he gave them another very important piece of advice: travel lightly — don’t carry too much baggage with you on your life’s journey.

There was a man named Richard, who was leading a group of 12 mid-life adventurers on a safari in East Africa. At the end of their first day’s walk, they came to their evening destination, a native village. They would camp there that night before continuing their backpacking hike in the morning.

Their guide the next day was to be the chief of the village. He was able to speak English fluently because of having been educated at a missionary school. The next day, with the village chief as their guide, they continued their journey. As they walked along, the village chief kept glancing at Richard’s over-stuffed backpack. It was one of those high-tech, ultra-light models designed for maximum cargo-carrying efficiency. That evening, as the group was setting up camp for the night, Richard offered to show the village chief his backpack and what he had in it.

With pride, he opened it and showed the chief what he had in all of its many compartments: eating utensils, cutting devices, direction finders, clothing, medical supplies, and more. He was

overloaded. When it was all spread out, Richard looked at the village chief for his reaction. The chief was amused but silent. Finally, after several minutes of surveying everything, he turned and asked Richard, “Do all of these things make you happy?”

Richard was stunned. There was something powerful about the question. He couldn’t answer that evening, and for weeks afterward, he thought about it. He not only thought about what he was carrying on the trip, but also what he was carrying through his entire life. He discovered that in the process, he was clarifying the core values of his life.

Some of the things he was carrying did add to his happiness, but many of them didn’t — at least not in any way that made sense for him to be dragging them along. That night, he unpacked his backpack and gave many of the items he was carrying to people in the village. More importantly, during the coming weeks and months, he unpacked and repacked his life. He learned to travel with a much lighter load.

That’s what Jesus was advising his followers to do. Travel as lightly as possible. Too many people are carrying things on their life’s journey that are weighing them down — things they don’t need. Some of these are material things, and others are mental — patterns of behavior that are no longer useful, long-established habits that are not adding anything important to their lives, grudges and resentments that are a heavy load and need to be unpacked and left behind.

It takes courage to look at what you’re carrying and decide to let it go.

This Bible story, then, is about two issues. First, each one of our lives will have successes and failures. It takes courage to keep going, but if you’re faithful in what you are called to do, it is God’s promise that the successes will outweigh the failures. The second issue: as you go about doing what you are called to do, learn to travel lightly. It will make the journey through life easier and more joyful. Amen.