

The Success Temptation
John 6:15 – 21
Fairview Evangelical Presbyterian Church
April 2, 2017

My father told me the story of when he went flying with a friend in a small single engine aircraft. My father's friend decided to show off a bit and he began doing all sorts of fancy maneuvers in the airplane: stalls, loops, rolls and other twisty turns designed to make the best of us lose our breakfast. After a while of such acrobatics the plane leveled off. My father said, *'We were flying along and I suddenly realized that my tie was in front of my nose. I looked over and asked, 'are we upside down?' My friend started laughing and said, 'I wondered how long it would take you to figure that out.'*

We need signs, guidance systems and landmarks to orient us in life. Sometimes the twists and turns of life can be disorienting. We may not realize right away that things are not the way they were, or the way they should be. The world turns upside down and us with it. We all know that when turmoil and trouble come our way, when doubts and trial are our lot, we need assistance to know how to regain our sense of direction. We understand that in times of difficulty and stress, it is important to keep our priorities straight and our commitments firm.

And, it is equally important for us to keep our priorities and commitments straight during good times, the times of success, as well. In our passage today we see Jesus providing for us a model of how we should react not just to trials, but to success as well.

There is a flattening process at work in the modern world. We view success largely in numbers: earnings per share, percentage of votes cast, box office receipts, units sold, funds raised, hits on the web site, and estimates of the number of people present. We calculate success numerically. Things that are not quantifiable are not part of the modern equation of success. Such things have fallen off our radar screens. We do not reject them so much as we simply do not perceive them. We do not value and understand them.

This leads to our first observation from today's passage: Jesus Christ's idea of success is not the world's Idea of success.

Jesus Christ's Idea of Success is not the World's Idea of Success

¹⁵ Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.

When I was a teenager, Andrew Lloyd Webber and Tim Rice released the rock and roll opera *'Jesus Christ Superstar.'* It caused a significant amount of controversy at the time in Christian circles. In retrospect I think much of the hullabaloo was overblown, for the portrait of Jesus Christ in the musical, though hip and highly stylized, was ultimately respectful and more or less true to the gospel

narratives. Much of the debate revolved around the words of the title song, *Jesus Christ Superstar*, ironically sung by the character of Judas Iscariot. Judas asks,

Jesus Christ, Jesus Christ
Who are you?
What have you sacrificed?

Judas' words are those of modern men and women. The modern secular world wonders what is the meaning and significance of the person of Jesus Christ. To the modern mind, the mission of Christ seems inscrutable. If Jesus Christ's life and death were part of the plan and purposes of God, then why did Jesus live among such an insignificant people, in a backward part of the ancient Roman Empire? As Judas sings, *'if you'd come today, you could have reached a whole nation. Israel in 4 B.C. had no mass communication.'* In Judas' words there is a level of chronological snobbery in the suggestion that Jesus Christ's mission on earth could have been aided if he had come today rather than yesterday. But I think these words strike a uniquely modern chord. Many in our world do wonder why Jesus came back then and not now. We believe in the power and importance of modern technology that interconnect the globe. We have seen the influence of mass political movements. We know the importance of organizing a constituency. We understand the impact of advertising. The modern passenger jet has connected the cities and nations of the earth. We live in the world of the 24/7 news cycle. It is the age of the internet, social media and of globalization. The world around us is shrinking. Surely it would have made more sense, in God's eternal master plan, to have sent the Son of God to earth in this day and age rather than in that day and age.

To the modern understanding, Jesus' response to the intent of the crowd is surprising. Jesus has a large crowd following him at this point. Isn't that what he wanted? Isn't he interested in reaching as many people as possible with his message? Isn't he pleased with the big crowd? If Jesus were a church growth oriented pastor, he'd be organizing small groups, recruiting a worship team, shopping for land near an exit on the interstate and developing a budget. It is surprising to us modern folk that Jesus does not play to the crowd. We assume that Jesus would want to reach as many people as he could. To think otherwise seems odd to us. Instead, we read that Jesus dismisses his disciples and retreats up a nearby mountain in order to hide from the crowd. Apparently he is not interested in maintaining or increasing his popularity. He does not seek to keep the momentum going. Why does Jesus act in such a counter intuitive manner? Why doesn't he seize the opportunity that is before him?

Part of the reason is that Jesus knows that the crowd's intent to make him king was based upon a mistaken understanding regarding the nature of his kingdom. They wanted a political kingship, making him a rival to the rule of the Roman Emperor. They wanted Jesus to be their king because of the miraculous feeding they had experienced. They had experienced a free lunch and wanted more. Politicians understand that one way to get votes is to provide goods and

services. The multitude did not want Christ; they wanted what he could do for them. They wanted him as king for the sake of what he could provide for them in return. As Saint Augustine wrote, *Jesus is usually sought after for something else, not for his own sake*. What the crowd wanted was revolution. But revolt was not the reason why Jesus had come to earth. Christ would render to Caesar the things that belonged to Caesar. Jesus had come in order to promote that which belonged properly to God.

This leads to our second insight: Jesus Christ's kingdom is spiritual, not political, and a right understanding of it is necessary to properly advance it.

Jesus Christ's Kingdom is Spiritual, not Political, and a Right Understanding of it is Necessary to Properly Advance it

¹⁵ Jesus, knowing that they intended to come and make him king by force, withdrew again to a mountain by himself.

It is noteworthy how often in the gospels we see Jesus get away in order to pray. He had the habit of setting aside times of prayer. Sometimes he includes the disciples in these prayer times, as he attempted to do when he prayed in the Garden of Gethsemane, and sometimes he prays alone, as he does in this particular instance. The point for us to note is that Jesus seeks to steer a path on the one hand, between the Scylla of being blown about by the crowd and, on the other, the Charybdis of being the dogged individualist. Jesus leaves the crowd behind, but in doing so he is not merely turning inward, he is turning God-ward for guidance. Jesus turns to his heavenly Father in prayer to seek his guidance and counsel. He does not presume upon God in his actions. He prayed and sought God's will and direction.

Jesus deliberately thwarts the crowd's attempt to tie his mission and ministry to a political agenda. This teaches us a very important (and practical) spiritual truth. The Christian faith is not identified with a particular nation, ruler, political party or political philosophy. These are two separate spheres of life: Christ and Caesar, Athens and Jerusalem, Church and State.

This has important practical ramifications. In some countries, political parties may adopt names that suggest spiritual endorsement of their political views – “Christian Democrats” or “Christian Socialists.” Such names are misleading. Jesus Christ and his church are not to be identified with any particular political party. Doing so suggests a spiritual endorsement to a political agenda. Such an endorsement does not exist. Christians must also be careful in presuming that one political party may represent their interests more fully than another. I have heard liberal Christians boast that they ‘have never voted for a Republican.’ I have heard conservative Christians wonder how any believer could vote Democratic. The Christian faith we confess ought to inform and guide the decisions we make as voters. Christians ought to be engaged in vigorous debate with one another as to which Biblical principles apply and take precedence in specific electoral contests. But Christianity is never to be identified with a particular political party.

As an aside, this is a key difference between the faiths of Christianity and Islam. Islam does not recognize a distinction between God and Caesar. There is no separation of mosque and state in a Muslim nation. The word 'Islam' means submission. The Islamic vision of society includes the submission of the political sphere under the rule and jurisdiction of the religious sphere. This is why, in nations where the percentage of the Muslim population approaches or exceeds fifty percent, there is tremendous cultural pressure exerted to establish Islamic law, Sharia, over the entire nation. In the Muslim understanding, the state is supposed to enact laws that assist you in being a "good" Muslim.

The spiritual nature of Jesus' kingdom means that the advance of the kingdom of God is not dependent upon the actions of Caesar. Jesus does not need the crowd's acclaim and approval in order to accomplish God's purposes in his ministry. If anything, the crowd's efforts and intent are a liability. The Kingdom of God grows spiritually, according to God's grace, blessings, and sovereign purposes. It does not grow through political effort. In the ancient world the church grew and advanced in spite of the opposition and persecution of the church by the Roman rulers. The same is true in the modern world in China, North Korea, Nigeria, and many other places. The church is growing dramatically, in spite of maltreatment, arrests, and harassment. Conversely, the approval of Caesar does not necessarily mean the advance of the kingdom of God. Many of the nations of Europe have established state churches, yet as a continent it is a place of declining Christian commitment and practice.

Jesus Christ's idea of success is not the same as this world's idea of success. In part, one reason for this is because Jesus Christ's kingdom is not a political kingdom, but rather a spiritual one. The next thing we learn from this passage is that Jesus Christ is Lord of nature.

Jesus Christ is Lord of Nature

they saw Jesus approaching the boat, walking on the water;

Each of the seven signs of John's gospel illustrates the authority of Jesus Christ. Jesus' authority over space is seen when he heals the nobleman's son by a verbal command given over thirteen miles from where the ill boy is laying. Jesus' authority over time is revealed in his healing of the man who had been lame for thirty-eight years. Jesus' authority over nothingness is seen in his feeding of the five thousand with only a few loaves and fish.

The signs also reveal Christ's superiority. Changing the water into wine at the wedding at Cana reveals Jesus' superiority over the ceremonial observances of Judaism. In the miracle from today's passage, Jesus' walking on the water reveals his superiority to Moses, the greatest Old Testament prophet. Moses led the people of Israel through the parted waters of the Red Sea. Jesus meets his people *walking* upon the waters of Galilee. Jesus' authority extends over nature itself. He is greater than Moses. We joke about how everyone talks about the weather but no

one does anything about it. Jesus could do something about it: that is the scope of his sovereignty and power.

Jesus Christ's idea of success is not the same as the world's concept of it. Jesus' kingdom is a spiritual kingdom, not a political one. This should not lead us to a mistaken conclusion that Jesus' authority is unimportant, or limited. Jesus possessed authority over nature itself as is seen in his ability to walk upon the water. Next, from this passage, we learn that most of the time, when in the midst of trial and trouble, we do not know God's purposes for us in it.

Most of the Time, when in the midst of Trial and Trouble, we do not know God's Purposes for us in it

¹⁶ When evening came, his disciples went down to the lake, ¹⁷ where they got into a boat and set off across the lake for Capernaum. By now it was dark, and Jesus had not yet joined them. ¹⁸ A strong wind was blowing and the waters grew rough.

I read this week of a pastor in a small southern church who asked one of his elders to pray on Sunday morning during the worship hour. The pastor was taken aback when the elder prayed: "Lord, I do not like buttermilk." The pastor wondered where this prayer was going. The elder continued, "And, Lord, I am not too fond of lard." The pastor was totally perplexed. The elder prayed, "Lord, I am not too crazy about plain flour. But when you mix them all together, and bake them in a hot oven, well, I just love biscuits." The elder continued, "When life gets hard, when things come up we do not like, or we do not understand: remind us that you are at work, and that we need to wait and see what you are making. After you get through mixing and baking, it will probably be better than biscuits. Amen."

There is something about the geography and weather patterns surrounding the Sea of Galilee that encourage unexpected and rapidly arriving winds and storms. I have seen it with my own eyes. On my first visit to Israel in 1972, my tour group took a boat ride on the Sea of Galilee. When we left the dock, the weather was sunny, clear and calm. Twenty minutes later, we found ourselves in the midst of a squall with gusting winds that would blow your hat off.

Jesus sent his disciples on ahead. I suspect that he sent them on ahead in part to prevent them from becoming swept up in the frenzy of those who sought to make him king. He did not want them to become infected with this idea. His intent was to pray and hide out from the crowd while their rebellious desire to forcibly declare him king would dissipate. The disciples leave by boat to head towards Capernaum. They were not heading across the lake but were rowing north to south, parallel to the shore. By walking on the water Jesus is able to catch up with his disciples without running the risk of discovery by any of the multitude who still might be camped out in the area.

It happened that the disciple's efforts on the Sea of Galilee proved frustrating for them. The winds came up against them. They found that they had worked and rowed for hours, but made no progress. Their efforts were fruitless.

This is the nature of trial and difficulty. We embark upon a task, a project, a vision, or a new commitment and we find that things do not unfold as we expected. We feel our wheels spin, make no progress, and experience no reward. The experience of trouble and difficulty, of life's frustrations, is not necessarily an indicator that we have failed to hear or follow God's lead. The disciples enter the boat at Jesus' instruction. They are doing what he asked them to do. Jesus sends them into a situation where they encounter exasperation. Many Christians know this experience. They are people of God and obey the Lord, but in doing so they experience trial and difficulty. Obedience to Jesus Christ does not imply ease and tranquility. The Christian walk is not a lazy float down the river of contentment. The ancient Israelites followed God and he led them into the wilderness – for forty years!

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Imagined Fears often Aggravate Real Distress

they saw Jesus approaching the boat, walking on the water; and they were terrified.

One of the attending realities of those times in life when we face difficulties and frustrations is that our imagination can get the better of us, making a difficult situation worse. The disciples are tired and frustrated. They look out upon the water and they see Jesus coming toward them and the result is they are terrified. They believe they are seeing a ghost, or a demon. Whatever the frustrations they feel because of the wind and water, they are now magnified because of their imagination. Their imagination makes their situation worse than it truly is.

Our imagination can often get the best of us in this way. We find ourselves in a difficult situation and, as we ponder it, we think of all the ways in which things can get worse. We become poster children for Murphy's Law: 'Whatever can go wrong, will go wrong: at the worst possible moment.' And its corollary: "Murphy was an optimist." This story teaches us that our imagination can be our enemy, aggravating our worry and sense of discouragement; mistaking good things for something terrible.

Of course, what they saw was not a ghost, or worse, but was the Lord Christ himself. His arrival leads us to the last point we learn from this story. Jesus Christ's presence with us in trial and trouble makes all the difference.

Jesus Christ's Presence with us in Trial and Trouble Makes all the Difference

²⁰ But he said to them, "It is I; don't be afraid." ²¹ Then they were willing to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the shore where they were heading.

When Christ is absent from the boat, frustration and trouble reign. When Christ is present, peace comes, fear departs, frustration leaves and a conclusion comes quickly. What makes the difference is Jesus Christ's presence. Christ does not leave his people comfortless.

It is sobering to think of the power that was available to Jesus. Jesus' walking upon the water is the fifth sign in John's gospel. It shows Jesus' absolute sovereignty over nature. When he joins the disciples in the boat, the wind that had been contrary all night long suddenly ceases to be so. We joke about how everyone talks about the weather but no one does anything about it. Jesus could do something about it: that is the scope of his sovereignty and power.

Some see in this ending a further miracle suggesting that the boat was catapulted from its place adrift on the lake to the dock on the shore. A more natural explanation is to understand it as expressing the relief that comes suddenly when we are released from experiences of great frustration and trial. At one moment everything seems hopeless and then the next everything is solved, released and restored.

The message to us from these verses of the passage is this: whatever trial or trouble you may face at this time, look for Jesus Christ. He is coming to you. He will not leave you comfortless. He will see you safely to shore. His presence will calm the troubled sea. His presence will remove the frustration and trial. Look to him. Trust in him. Turn to him in faith.

Say "Amen!" Somebody.

John 6:15 – 21

¹⁴ When the people saw him* do this miraculous sign, they exclaimed, “Surely, he is the Prophet we have been expecting!”* ¹⁵ When Jesus saw that they were ready to force him to be their king, he slipped away into the hills by himself.

Jesus Walks on Water

¹⁶ That evening Jesus’ disciples went down to the shore to wait for him. ¹⁷ But as darkness fell and Jesus still hadn’t come back, they got into the boat and headed across the lake toward Capernaum. ¹⁸ Soon a gale swept down upon them, and the sea grew very rough. ¹⁹ They had rowed three or four miles* when suddenly they saw Jesus walking on the water toward the boat. They were terrified, ²⁰ but he called out to them, “Don’t be afraid. I am here!*” ²¹ Then they were eager to let him in the boat, and immediately they arrived at their destination!