

Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost
October 21, 2018
Christ the Rock Evangelical Lutheran Church
Farmington, New Mexico

Isaiah 53:10-12 Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer,
and though the Lord makes his life an offering for sin,
he will see his offspring and prolong his days,
and the will of the Lord will prosper in his hand.

11 After he has suffered,
he will see the light of life and be satisfied;
by his knowledge my righteous servant will justify many,
and he will bear their iniquities.

12 Therefore I will give him a portion among the great,
and he will divide the spoils with the strong,
because he poured out his life unto death,
and was numbered with the transgressors.
For he bore the sin of many,
and made intercession for the transgressors.

“God's Suffering Servant Redefines Success”

I think that is one of the things that makes us who we are. Of course, there's another way of looking at life and agreeing to what makes us human. Here's the human test: “Have you ever made a small, weird sound when you remembered something embarrassing (groaning)? Have you ever put on a pair of pants and then much later realized that there was a loose sock smushed up against your thigh? Have you ever broken something in real life and then found yourself looking for an undo button - in real life? Have you ever stared at your phone smiling like an idiot while texting with someone? Have you ever subsequently texted that person the phrase - I'm staring at the phone smiling like an idiot?”¹

Scientists and psychologists have different definitions of what makes a person human. Some would say we are just the different combinations of our genetic code. Others theorize that we are basically programmed to do what history and biology and psychology have already mapped out for us, just basically computers with squishy stuff up here. And then there are the funny things that we do without any logical explanations that seem to offer better evidence of what joins us all together.

But in order to be human, you're not just making your way through life. It's not a board game where we want to navigate our way from the beginning to the end. We want to win. We all have hopes and dreams and aspirations. We want to be successful. And we want people to notice. We want to be able to do something meaningful and accomplish it in a way that people respect and admire. I think that's one thing that just makes us human.

¹ Ze Frank. “Are You Ready To Take The 'Human' Test?” 15 July 2016 © 2016 NPR. Accessed <https://www.npr.org/templates/transcript/transcript.php?storyId=485710702> on 21 October 2018.

And today we want to see that God has goals for us. They don't always match up with our own very human goals. In fact, they sometimes clash in ways that can't be resolved. But even better than our theories, our hopes or our dreams is the goal for life God has in store for us. And God has one way of making those goals a reality. He has his Servant. Through the suffering of God's Servant, God's people reach his ultimate goal for us. That means God's Suffering Servant Redefines our Definition of Success.

One of the most helpful things is to really pick apart what we think life should be about. What is my standard? What am I trying to accomplish? How am I trying to live my life? So much of what we look for in spirituality and religion is about trying to use spiritual power or develop spiritual practices that will help us get where we want to go. And there are plenty of religions that will give that. Buddhism promises practitioners a path to avoid pain and suffering, following steps to get to a state where there is no negativity. Hinduism teaches that suffering is not really good or bad, it's neutral. It's just about getting your life in order so you can reach the next level of existence. That might sound good in theory. But if I stomp on your foot on the way out of church today, you would see the flaws in this way of thinking.

There are people who study our spiritual habits and spiritual beliefs. They have come to put a label on the most common way we look at the role of religion in our lives. They call it Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. Here is the basic explanation: Therapeutic deals with a tendency of the individual to be most concerned about his own emotional psychological well-being; Moralistic deals with a definition of ethics or morality based on individual responsibility; and Deism refers to a belief system in which God as creator wound up the universe and has simply left it to wind down throughout history without any guidance or supervision on His part. It fits very nicely with the outlook on life for so many people in our world today. And it's easy for us to adopt this same mindset. We are willing to adopt any approach that will help us become better people. We reason that any system of belief can be beneficial if it provides a basic framework for improving life. We look at it like our friends who adopt the Keto diet or start juicing to get healthy. But if someone adopts an all ice cream all the time diet and it works for them, who are we to judge?

Here's the big problem with adopting this attitude for Christians. In Isaiah 53, we get introduced to the way God looks at the big goals and hopes for our lives. This section starts out like this: **"Yet it was the Lord's will."** (Isaiah 53:10) Isaiah is literally saying this is what makes God happy. God is the one who created each human being. God is the one who ingrained every person with a purpose and design for life. God is the one who plans our lives to serve his bigger purposes.

To achieve that big picture goal, God needed a servant. He sends his righteous Servant to carry out his biggest and best work for your life. Here is the life God had mapped out for his Servant: **"Yet it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer, and...the Lord makes his life an offering for sin."** (Isaiah 53:10) Success for God's Servant comes after suffering. Greatness comes after sacrifice: **"because he poured out his life unto death, and was numbered with the transgressors."** (Isaiah 53:12) This isn't the way our world

usually works. This isn't the way our minds reason things should go. But this is God's plan for ultimate success. Suffering and death are what lead to vindication, victory and success for God's Servant. God's Servant suffers to bring his people success.

What God had in store for his Servant doesn't match up very well with the mantra of self-help gurus. That's because what God's people need is more than just Moralistic Therapeutic Deism. That becomes obvious when you see interviews with people after a hurricane; when you talk to a friend going through a divorce. This isn't the way it was supposed to happen. When you end up taking care of your aging parents; when you plug away at a decent job that pays the bills but you aren't writing the next great American novel. This isn't the way you thought your life would go.

That's one of the basic things we share with all people. That's one of the key components to what it means to be human. It's a little bit humbling. Being human means we don't always achieve our goals. Now for school or work, that can be disappointing and motivates us to try harder. But there are bigger standards and more meaningful goals for life in general. And when we're honest with ourselves, we have to admit we don't always attain our own standards. Unfortunately we don't always get to celebrate success. And that means God is concerned with what is wrong with our lives. God is consumed with dealing with more than just dashed dreams and empty promises.

See, in God's eyes, the failure to develop a killer career or have a model marriage or earn national acclaim for your accomplishments isn't the biggest problem. It's the problem that your life goals so often contradict God's revealed plans. Your efforts of going your own way, making your own path through life end up as rebellion against your loving Creator. It's a violation of God's trust. And when you face discouragement because your plans backfire or feel a dreaded sense of despair when life doesn't go your way, you have no reasonable way of processing what went wrong. Sure, you can get defensive and blame all the people around you in your life. You can live in a constant state of denial. But none of that really deals with this constant need inside human hearts to define success on our own terms. Actually, our need for independence and autonomy, to define success on our own terms, leads to the suffering we work so hard to avoid.

What made Jesus successful wasn't avoiding pain or suffering, it wasn't achieving perfect happiness at all times or attaining a level of comfort and prosperity that would make everyone on Instagram jealous. Jesus followed God's will. And God's will wasn't always easy or pleasant: **"it was the Lord's will to crush him and cause him to suffer."** (Isaiah 53:10) Jesus lived his life for God's purpose. What Jesus went through and everything Jesus endured had the end goal of making God happy. And what ultimately makes God happy is to have his people back. Jesus gave up his life as a guilt offering to pay for our lives lived out of whack with God. Jesus experienced the trouble and toil we deserve to face. Success for Jesus came through suffering.

You're killing it! I've found out lately, this is one of the highest compliments you can get. It's not just that you finished what you need to do. It's not just that you are doing ok, satisfied the basic demands of your assignment. If you're killing it, you are tackling your work

obligations like a champ. If you're killing it, you're doing your workout with enthusiasm, energy, and gusto. You're killing it means you're doing an amazing job and you're doing it in a way that other people want to follow your example.

Jesus was killing it at the most unsuspecting and awkward moments. Because Jesus gave up his life on the cross and rose on Easter morning, he will live forever. Because Jesus faced the pain and suffering of hell, God's people are received and accepted by God himself. The righteous Servant took all our twisted plans and all our broken promises and all our violated trust with God, and he took them on his own back. Because Jesus did absolutely everything necessary to win sinners back to God, his life was a success. His success is your success.

When I was doing some research for this Sunday, I scoured through some blog posts and podcasts from successful entrepreneurs about what it takes to achieve your goals. Today in our world we have motivational speakers and brainiacs behind start ups who are help up as the next Steve Jobs or Bill Gates. I was searching through their advice on what it takes to get ahead so I could find all kinds of flaws and ammunition to use against them. But there was something surprising I found. What they said, at least the ones I ran across, was the idea of living for a bigger purpose, finding something more meaningful to motivate your life. To look outside yourself to really make a difference.

For Christians, God's Servant helps us zero in on our ultimate purpose in life. God's suffering Servant redefines success. Jesus shows us God's superior plans for our lives. Jesus fills our lives with gratitude for the ultimate sacrifice he has already made for us.

That doesn't mean you have to do everything Jesus did. That doesn't mean you have to experience pain and suffering on the level of the Messiah to fulfill your ultimate goals. What it does mean is that Jesus gives you a different definition of success. The suffering Servant redefines what is good and true and beautiful in your life.

Jesus doesn't want you to think of everything in your life as sacrifice. He already did all that and you can't do it better than he did. Instead Jesus wants you to live your life with the focus on your highest calling. Jesus doesn't want you to work at obeying and following him. That means it's a weight, a burden. Instead, Jesus wants you to live your life in a mission. Instead of wearing you out, your mission from Jesus invigorates you. It lights a fire in you. It becomes your reason for being, the fuel for your very existence. And your mission isn't just one compartment of your life that you get in your car to do for a few hours of every day. It focuses on the people around you. Your mission fills your life and draws in all your family and every one of your friends. That's because you are already a success in God's eyes. Because of what your Savior suffered, you already have ultimate success. God's Servant, Jesus Christ, redefines success. Amen.