

All the trappings of success

Exodus 5:1-23

October 2, 2005

I have tried. I have tried to do the right thing. I don't pretend to be perfect; I make mistakes. Sometimes I do stupid things. Sometimes I get it wrong. Sometimes I don't do the best job, but I try. I try to do the right thing.

And I do it for you. I do it for you, Lord. I want to please you. I want to do what you want me to do, not what everybody else wants me to do. As best I can I have tried to do what you have asked me to do.

Then why? Why is my life so hard? Why have I known so much grief, so much disappointment, so much struggle? Why haven't I enjoyed more success? Why do so few people appreciate what I am trying to do? You don't seem to want to help ... Where are you when I need you? Where are you when those I am trying to help need you?

Sound familiar? Have you ever feel like that? Have you ever said something like that to God?

You must have! If you have genuinely tried to do the right thing, if you have in any way taken the will of God seriously, you must have. Because people who do the right thing often fail. People who do the right thing often find trouble. People who do the right thing often experience great loss. Saying "Yes" to God is no guarantee that your life will follow a smooth path and things will fall into place around you. In fact, it is more likely the opposite will be true -- when you say "Yes" to God, the way will become more difficult and things around you will start to come apart.

That is just what happened to Moses. He finally said "Yes" to God and went to Egypt. He told his father-in-law he wanted to return to check on his relatives and he went to Egypt. All the way from out-of-the-way Midian, he went back to Egypt! After forty years of purposefully staying away, he went back to Egypt! Just because, only because, the Lord asked him to do it, he went back to Egypt!

And once he was in Egypt, he did what the Lord had asked him to do. He didn't stay in the shadows, snooping around and checking things out from a safe distance, making secret plans for a slave rebellion. Moses went with his brother Aaron right to the king of Egypt and told him: *The Lord, the God of Israel, says, "Let me people go!"* It was an act of courage, it was an act of obedience. It was the right thing to do.

Moses did the right thing ... and all hell broke loose!

- Hell in the form of an angry king: *I do not know the Lord; and I will not let Israel go. Get those slaves back to work!*

- Hell in the form of redoubled oppression: *Stop giving [them] straw for making bricks. Make them go and find it for themselves. But still require them to make the same number of bricks as before, not one brick less!*

- Hell in the form of senseless cruelty: When the Israelite foremen could not produce the same number of bricks, for obvious reasons, they were beaten by their Egyptian slave masters.

- Hell in the form of rejection by the very people Moses and Aaron came to help: The Hebrew foremen declare to Moses and Aaron, *The Lord will punish you for making the king and his officers hate us!*

All hell broke loose and Moses cried out to God: *Why did you send me here? Ever since I went to the king to speak for you, he has treated them cruelly. And you have done nothing to help them!*

Is it a legitimate complaint? The facts as Moses states them are correct. Ever since he went to the king to speak on the Lord's behalf, things have gotten not better, but much worse. But perhaps the pertinent issue is not the facts themselves, but the way Moses -- along with the rest of us who are trying to do the right thing -- interpret those facts.

Jesus pointed out that ...

the gate to hell is wide and the road that leads to it is easy ... but the gate to life is narrow and the way that leads to it is hard.

But we don't believe him! When our lives become difficult, when we run into opposition, when things go badly, we ask ourselves:

What am I doing wrong? How did I get off track? What can I do, what can I change, to make things go more smoothly?

And when things are going well, when our path through life is smooth and easy, we don't ask any questions. We just whisper, *Thank God!* We believe the opposite of what Jesus says. We seek out the wide and easy path. And we expect faithfulness -- doing the right thing -- to yield all the trappings of success.

It will be important for us to heed Moses' experience and Jesus' warning as we celebrate together our 150th year as a church. What do we have to celebrate? What are the marks of our success? What are the marks of a successful church?

- Numbers? Are we more or less successful if we have greater or fewer members? Have our best times been when we enjoyed the largest membership?
- Growth? Do we know we are doing the right thing when we are growing -- adding members, adding dollars to our budget, adding programs?
- Influence? Do we measure success by the influence we wield in our community, by the number of influential people that seek us out?
- Longevity? Is it our longevity itself that we celebrate? Is the fact that we still exist after 150 years the clearest indicator of our success?

What do you think? It all depends on how we define success, and how we define success depends on our aim, our purpose, our reason for being. A church may well enjoy all the trappings of success and have failed miserably as a people of God. The gate to life is narrow and the way that leads to it is hard! Our reason for being is life! Our purpose is to proclaim the way to life! Our aim is to follow the One who leads us to life! The only mark of our success, the only thing we have to celebrate, is our once and future willingness to follow Jesus whatever the cost. Now I am not trying to make a virtue of failure. Faithfulness is the virtue, but the fact is that faithfulness often means hardship and struggle and loss and opposition, at least in the short term

So how do we know? How do we know we are on the right path? How do we know God is with us?

The only assurance God would offer Moses was this, spoken at the foot of Mount Sinai, well before Moses had returned to Egypt, well before Moses had even agreed to return to Egypt. God said to Moses:

I will be with you, and when you bring the people out of Egypt, you will worship me on this mountain. That will be the proof that I have sent you ...

The only proof of God's presence comes when it is all over! The only assurance that Moses and the people of Israel will have that they are on the right path will be when they get to where it's supposed to be going! The way that leads to life is hard ... but it does lead to life!

It's that *far horizon* thing again!

We must keep our eyes on a far horizon and remember we are part of a great procession ...

It's the far horizon that keeps us going and keeps us focussed. We celebrate not where we've come from, but where we are going. We celebrate that we are still on the way, still faithful in following wherever Jesus leads, whether things are getting better or things are getting worse, whether we are all in agreement or whether we experience opposition even within our own ranks, whether we enjoy all the trappings of success or, what is more likely, that we do not.

We are on the way to life, a way that is sometimes narrow and always hard. But when we get there ...

Just being on the way is a good reason to celebrate!