



NEIGHBORHOOD UNITARIAN UNIVERSALIST CHURCH

Success Vs. Greatness

Rev. Hannah Petrie, Associate Minister
October 17, 2010

301 N. Orange Grove Blvd. Pasadena, CA 91103 (626) 449-3470 information@uuneighborhood.org

I'm going to try to do a lot of things in this sermon, and I may or may not succeed. Along with offering some jumping off points for your own reflections, I want us to think about the limits of our success, and the limitlessness of our greatness.

Parents are often our first models of success, and I'm no different. Sometimes we learn by seeing what not to do, or what patterns of thinking to not fall into. I'd like to share a story about my dad, because there's no other story that can illustrate why this topic is important to me, and how it haunts my own spiritual development. Maybe you will recognize yourself in parts of it.

It's not so much a story of when, where, and what, but a story of perspectives. Success can be a scary word for people for a few reasons. Success, like money, seems scarce these days, or hard to come by. Or, a certain image of success can become a life's work; it can become the overriding definition of a person's worth. If that vision is ever elusive, what does that do to a person's life?

In my dad's case, success was not elusive. An only child, perhaps he became accustomed to having plenty of positive reinforcement all to himself. He chose a career he knew he could succeed at. When he graduated from divinity school in the early 70's, he went into social work instead of ministry. His first job was as a counselor at a small social service agency that served youth in suburban Chicago. But within a few years he was running the agency, and over 35 years, he grew the agency into a thriving and solid institution that continues to serve marginalized youth and families with a variety of programs. Then, about seven years ago, he took the CEO position at another non-profit five times the size, also serving children, now in inner city Chicago. Considering the economic climate non-profits face these days, he has done pretty well.

But it hasn't been without its up and downs. Perhaps my dad is not unique in that, when things are going well and the money's coming in for his organization, he's pretty chipper. But when things are not going well, he gets depressed. His depression seems to be connected to a deep place of self-worth. If he can't bring in the money, it's a failure that signals to him that he's not good enough. Interestingly, once the economy tanked, he has found some immunity to his depression because he feels his personal failings are now camouflaged against the failings of the economy.

What has struck me in recent years is how disconnected he is from the clients, from the kids his organization serves, and maybe even saves sometimes. I love my dad dearly, and I want to share this remarkable distinction. My dad's drive to succeed has not mainly been motivated by the thousands of kids he has served over the decades with his heroic fund-raising efforts. His drive to succeed has mainly been motivated by the *need* to succeed, to confirm his own sense of goodness and worth.

But cultural thinker Cornel West says, "If success is just an end and not a means to something else, then spiritual malnutrition and existential emptiness await you. Do you think that somehow you can stuff your humanity into your profession and your social function? Try it and see. No way!" Like our late Minister Emeritus Brandy did, my dad puts a lot of spiritual stock in baseball, and it remains to be seen if his poor Cubbies will see a title before he leaves this earth. While the church of baseball may work for my dad, I have learned for myself that I need to understand what Cornel West is talking about. My understanding of success needs to put some spiritual fat on my bones.

The topic of this sermon came to me well over a year ago, when I was reading Cornel West's book, *Hope on a Tightrope*. Throughout this book he kept returning to the distinction between success and greatness. He echoed the themes Jerry Springer brought up in his speech, that, no matter what profession you find success in, you are required to answer ethical questions as sincerely as you can. West prefers to speak in terms of moral sensibility, and worries that people no longer understand the need for a moral compass.

West says, "This is a deep problem these days. To be great in our times often means to have great material prosperity and no moral magnanimity at all . . ." But, he continues, "If you're not spiritually, politically, morally prepared to deal with success, then a catastrophe can follow thereafter. In fact, it can blind you in your own quest for greatness . . . If you think you can possess your soul by means of possessing *things*, you've got moral constipation stalking you!"¹

This 'moral constipation' echoes what the sociologist Dalton Conley said in the third reading I shared with you, that creeping feeling of *alienation* many Americans are experiencing. We're working so hard, and yet feelings of satisfaction and wholeness can elude us.

But before I go further, let me say a few things about the notion of success that will keep things complex and authentic. Success is not a dirty word, nor is material success some kind of sin. Let me try to identify three categories of folks and their unique associations to success. Because of the economically tumultuous times we live in, they tend to lift up generational distinctions.

First, there are those of you who have enjoyed a traditional sense of success, and I want to honor that. You have worked hard to be successful in your professions and have enjoyed the fruits of your labor: a nice house, being a good provider for your children, a high quality of life. You have been blessed to be able to achieve the American dream, and by and large, retirement has either already occurred or it's in the next one or two decades.

Then there are those of you who may have heard yourselves described in the sociologist's reading, who, though working hard and demonstrating success, experience a fractured sense of self in the face of so much competitive anxiety. There may be a nagging sense of diminishing returns, financial and otherwise. It's a success characterized by chronic busy-ness, and the pressure to balance work and family. If the subject of retirement comes up among your peers, there are probably nervous jokes made about whether or not you'll live to see it.

Finally, there are those of you who may feel you have yet to experience any kind of success in the conventional sense, mainly due to a scarcity of jobs and opportunity. Perhaps some of you are not as young as you think you should be at this station in life, and there may be a nagging feeling that you are running out of time.

Now for all those I left out, for whom these issues of work and success don't apply or don't quite ring true, I will now turn to the subject that applies to all of us, and that is this notion of greatness.

At face value, greatness sounds like something only people like Gregory Boyle could achieve, the Jesuit Priest who founded Homeboy Industries in Los Angeles, who has worked to show ex-gang members their self-worth for decades. But I want to make it clear that the greatness I'm talking about is something far grander than any individual achievement. We all have greatness, so it is not something we arrive at, but something we discover. And once we do, we can embody this greatness and make it manifest in the world.

As a Jesuit Priest, Boyle talks a lot about God in his book. He has a message about God that religious liberals need to hear. Whether we're atheist, agnostic, or do believe in God, Boyle points out that, no matter what, "when the vastness of God meets the restriction of our own humanity, words can't hold it. The best we can do is find the moments that rhyme with this expansive heart of God."² Or another way he says it, "Our image of who God is and what's on God's mind is more tiny than it is troubled. It trips more on our puny sense of God than over conflicting creedal statements or theological considerations."³

¹ *Hope on a Tightrope* by Cornel West, pp. 13 & 32.

² *Tattoos on the Heart* by Gregory Boyle, p. 35.

³ Same, p. 27.

Here's another story. Cesar is one of the many homies Boyle has connected with from an early age.

At three o'clock in the morning, the phone rings. It's Cesar. He says what every homie says when they call in the middle of the night, "Did I wake you?" I always think, *Why no, I was just waiting and hoping that you'd call.* Cesar is sober, and it's urgent that he talk to me. "I gotta ask you a question. You know how I've always seen you as my father – ever since I was a little kid? Well, I hafta ask you a question." Now Cesar pauses, and the gravity of it all makes his voice waver and crumble, "Have I . . . been . . . your son?"

"Oh, hell, yeah," I say. "Whew," Cesar exhales, "I thought so." Now his voice becomes enmeshed in a cadence of gentle sobbing. "Then . . . I will be . . . your son. And you . . . will be my father. And nothing will separate us, right?"

"That's right." [Boyle comments] In this early morning call Cesar did not discover that he has a father. He discovered that he is a son worth having . . . he felt himself beloved. Jesus, in Matthew's gospel, says, "How narrow is the gate that leads to life." Mistakenly, I think, we've come to believe that this is about restriction . . .

Our choice is not to focus on the narrow, but to narrow our focus. The gate that leads to life is not about restriction at all. It is about an entry into the expansive. There is a vastness in knowing you're a son/daughter worth having. We see our plenitude in God's own expansive view of us."⁴

Here's what I'd like you to take away from that: Whether or not God is involved, it is this expansive view of ourselves that defines greatness. Whether it matters to us that God knows it or not, *we* need to know our inherent goodness. And clearly it's not just the homies, or the marginalized people of the world who struggle with this question. It's people like my dad, like myself, like anyone who mistakes an external definition of success for self-worth. Our greatness comes from within, and nothing can touch that.

Here's more God food for thought. Boyle writes,

"The minute we think we've arrived at the most expansive sense of who God is, 'this Great, Wild God,' as the poet Hafiz writes, breaks through our claustrophobia of our own articulation, and things get large again. Richard Rohr writes in *Everything Belongs* that nothing of our humanity is to be discarded. God's unwieldy love . . . wants to accept all that we are and sees our humanity as the privileged place to encounter this magnanimous love. No part of our hardwiring or our messy selves is to be disparaged. Where we stand, in all our mistakes and imperfection, is holy ground."⁵

This is the Universalist God, the God of our liberal religious theology and heritage. This is why we don't believe in hell, because this kind of God would never send any of us there, no matter how many ethical questions we've failed to answer correctly, no matter how many ways we perceive we have failed to find success.

It's the same God the father of Universalism, John Murray, was preaching about in the late 18th century in New England, when he said, "Go out into the highways and by-ways. Give the people something of your new vision. You may possess a small light, but uncover it, let it shine, use it in order to bring more light and understanding to the hearts and minds of men and women. Give them not hell, but hope and courage; preach the kindness and everlasting love of God."

⁴ Same, pp. 31-32.

⁵ Same, p. 35,

Boyle says that, sooner or later, we all discover that kindness is the only strength there is.⁶ This is the second half of discovering our greatness - when we understand that our goodness is meant to extend out to the world, expand toward others. I'm convinced that the function of our greatness, our innate goodness, is to embody the limitless expansiveness of compassion. To be great literally means that your heart, that your kindness, knows no bounds.

Compassion is the worship theme this month, but it may be that a lot of us don't really know what it means. Boyle has a story for this too. When he was teaching a literature course to some inmates at Folsom Prison, they read Flanner O'Connor's *A Good Man Is Hard to Find*. When they were speaking about the transformation of the Grandmother's character, Boyle saw they were using these terms interchangeably: sympathy, empathy, and compassion. He writes,

Like any teacher stalling until the bell rings, I ask these felons to define their terms. "Well, sympathy," one begins, "is when your homie's mom dies and you go up to him and say, "'Spensa - sorry to hear 'bout your moms.'" Just as quickly, there is a volunteer to define empathy. "Yeah, well, empathy is when your homie's mom dies and you say, 'spensa 'bout your moms, *Sabes que*, my moms died six months ago. I feel ya, dog."

"Excellent," I say. "Now, what's compassion?" No takers. The class collectively squirms and stares at their state-issue boots. "Come on now," I say. "Compassion - what's it mean?" Their silence is quite sustained, like visitors entering for the first time some sacred, mysterious temple. Finally, an old-timer, down twenty-five years, tentatively raises his finger. I call on him.

"Well, now," he says, all eyes on him, shaking his head, "Compassion - that's sumthin' altogether different." He ponders what he'll say next. "Cause," he adds humbly, "That's what Jesus did. I mean, Compassion . . . IS . . . God." God is compassionate, loving kindness. All we're asked to do is to be in the world who God is.⁷

When you leave today, I don't expect many of our strivings, or images of what our success in life should look like, will change. There is nothing wrong with them, and I trust that by and large, they are noble dreams of success. But I hope we are just a little more uncomfortable with their confines, and consider that there may be whole other worlds of ways of understanding ourselves that we haven't yet dreamed of. I hope that we take what Cornel West says here to heart: "It's critical . . . to be true to oneself in such a way that one's connection to the suffering of others is an integral part of understanding yourself."⁸

We may possess a small light, but may we let it shine. May we let our goodness, our greatness, shine so that we feel it, and know it - that we may show others how their light, their goodness, shines just as brightly.

⁶ Same, p. 124

⁷ Same, p. 62.

⁸ West, p. 13.