

“Re-evaluating Success”

Everything is created by God. We can even say everything exists for God, but this does not mean everything stays with God. There are plenty of examples in the world where God’s purpose is either challenged or ignored. Think with me about this. God has created us with the capacity to be creative. We’re created to create. We imagine things. We make things. We build all kinds of machines and technologies which, over time, have developed our societies. In keeping with the image of the One who created us, we have the ability to bring into being that which did not exist and the reality of it shapes our world. I don’t know if God had the idea of the cell phone in mind from the beginning but what an incredible piece of equipment human beings have created. You very well may have a cell phone on your person right now or you’ll have one within easy reach sometime today. The latest statistics tell us that very soon the number of cell phone users in the world will surpass five billion. With a global population of seven billion that’s over 70% of the world’s people with cell phones and the number just keeps growing. I think we take it for granted but isn’t it a marvel that we can pick up a small handheld machine, push some numbers, hold it to our ear and connect with just about anybody in the world? We are created with the capacity to create and one of the results of this God-given ability is the near magical possibilities of micro-technology. It’s incredible, but it’s not all good. The same technology used to build smartphones is used to build what’s called smart bombs. These so called “smart bombs” combine a highgrade munition with an onboard computer and the result is stunning accuracy and maximum destruction when hitting a target. We’re created with the capacity to create but is this what God had in mind? Let’s say it again. Not everything God enables in us is always used for God’s purpose in the world. Smartphones make it possible for us to connect with each other. Smart bombs make it possible for us to destroy each other. This is why I say everything exists for God but not everything stays with God. Of course, high-end technology isn’t the only way we experience this kind of thing. Put the cell phone down. What about the gift of language itself? We are created with minds that have the ability to develop language and our language expresses our feelings, and our ideas, and our beliefs. It’s really no less magical that I’m talking and you’re listening, and what comes from that are thoughts and reactions and understanding. It’s incredible, but it’s not all good. We know that words not only have the capacity to heal, they can hurt. When I was very young I learned the saying that many of you learned. “Sticks and stones may break my bones but words will never hurt me.” How untrue that is. Why would we ever teach that to our children. Of course, words can hurt. One of the realities of our modern time is what is often referred to as a “lack of civility” in our public debate. Do we always agree on the important issues of our day. No. Are there ways to discuss these differences that are respectful and thoughtful. Absolutely. Does that always happen. We know that it doesn’t. So, the God-given ability we have to express ourselves can bring us together or it can push us apart. What God creates is intended for God but sometimes what God creates doesn’t stay with God and this is where our morning’s scripture invites our reflection today.

The disciples came to Jesus and complained that others were doing good in people’s lives by healing and helping but they weren’t following the disciples lead, so *The Twelve* put a stop to it. As is often true, there is a backstory working here and knowing the backstory helps us understand what’s going on. Earlier in Mark’s Gospel we’re told that Jesus shared his power with the disciples. He did this so they could go into the world and share his healing and peace with others. They went out empowered by Jesus and they had great success. Just for a moment, let’s dip back into the sixth chapter of the gospel and catch the way Mark says it. Jesus called *The Twelve* and sent them out two by two. He gave them authority “over the unclean spirits.” “So they went,” says the gospel, “[casting] out demons, and anointing with oil many who were sick and cured them.” (Mark 6: 12-13) What the disciples were doing was God-given. *The Twelve* were participating in the mission of Jesus and the result was outstanding but it wasn’t all good. Where we’ve read today we see how *The Twelve* took the success God made possible in them and turned the focus upon themselves. *The Twelve* shifted from being “God-centered” to being “Me-centered” and Jesus had a problem with that. If we are not yet convinced about the seriousness of what was happening then let’s note more of the backstory. Just before our reading for today the disciples are walking along the road with Jesus. The conversation of *The Twelve* moved from celebrating how they were able to bring God’s presence into the lives of people to arguing who among themselves was the greatest. Their success fueled their egos. We don’t need anymore evidence. The disciples fell into a “Me-centered” attitude and the result was a denial of what God had given them. They were called by Jesus, they were walking beside Jesus but they were no longer with Jesus. “It’s not about you,” Jesus wanted them to know. “Your success and your faithfulness are always about God.” And so it was that the teaching Jesus gave drove home his point. His words were direct and harsh sounding. “If [there is any part of you] that causes you to stumble, cut it off...” (Mark 9:43) If you’re pulled away from a God-centered life then cut away

what's pulling at you. What should have been a continued celebration of what God was doing in the disciples' lives became a hard lesson for them. What did this mean for The Twelve? And even more importantly, what does it mean for us?

If your hand is the problem, cut it off. If your foot is the problem, lose it. If your eye is the problem, pluck it out. It's nonsense, of course, to think Jesus meant this literally. He isn't after disciples who are physically maimed and wounded. Jesus wants disciples who are solidly and completely living God-centered lives. His teaching is about attitudes and values and priorities and faithfulness. Jesus paints a metaphor of hands and feet and eyes but he's really talking about what's at the center of us. If there is any part of our inner selves, any part of the God-given, God-created person we are intended to be, that denies what God hopes for us cut it loose. Let it fall away. God wants all of us, our whole selves. God has created us for God and Jesus wants us to stay with God. And, it isn't just for our sakes. Staying with God is important because the children are watching.

There's a detail in the text we almost miss if we're not careful. As Jesus challenged the disciples to cut away selfish and Me-centered attitudes he held a child on his lap. It's not just that caution we might stumble. When our attitudes and values and priorities are overly self-centered it can cause the little ones to stumble, too. Our children are watching us. My mind went back and grabbed a surprising memory from my childhood. I was surprised but I remembered an anti-cigarette public service announcements from decades ago. I googled the spot wondering if it was recorded somewhere and suddenly there it was, from 1967. The theme of the public service announcement is "Like father, like son." It shows a father and son in the car and the boy pretends he's driving just like the dad. It shows the dad washing the car and the son is there splashing the soap on the car door. They walk along a path and the dad throws a rock, which the son then does in exactly the same way. Then, as they sit together by a tree the father reaches for his cigarettes. He shakes one out and then lays the pack down between them. The camera zooms in as the boy picks up the pack and looks at it curiously. The voice of the announcer says, "Like father, like son. Think about it."

Jesus wants us to think about how our attitudes and responses impact our kids. He teaches we must cut off what pulls us away from God because the children, the little ones, are watching. Jesus said the attitudes in *The Twelve* mattered to the little ones and it's still true. Lives that are self-centered and "me" focused limit our faithfulness and our kids take notice. Our success in life isn't just a matter of the positions and accomplishments we gain for ourselves but about what we instill in the generation that follows. We and they are created by God and the greatest success in our faith is to remain with God so they will, too.

We have church staff who provide leadership for our children and youth but, in fact, we're all involved in ministering to our kids. We don't want to stumble in our faith and we pray that God will help us in that. But it's not just so can be more successful in our religious lives. The children are watching. May what they see in us make it clear that we live with God and may what they learn from us make it clear that they are with God, too.