



**Sunday, October 20, 2024**

**Twenty-second Sunday after Pentecost**

**Mark 10:35-45**

**"The Surprising Failure of Success"**

**Pastor Nancy M. Raabe**

"Winning isn't everything." Isn't that what we often hear after a disappointing loss? The next question from a player on the losing team might be, "Then what IS everything?" Answer: "Oh, it's in how you play the game." But that might not be good enough. The player could protest, "We played our best – and still we lost." Or "We played clean, they played dirty, and they won. No fair."

Which does often seem to be the case in some professional sports. I don't know the Eagles well enough, but I always like to think the Green Bay Packers at least tried to play clean. Yet they were often set back by dirty playing by the opposing team. Such as when, in Week 17 of the 2014 season, Detroit Lion defensive tackle Ndamukong Suh stepped, no, *stomped*, on Aaron Rodgers' ankle. (Yeah but 10 years ago, you say? We remember.) There was a lot of buzz about this afterward how despicable it was, but actually it didn't help the Lions. Rodgers stuck it out and the Lions ended up losing the game and the division title to the Packers - by one game.

Of course we don't want our teams to lose, and we root vigorously for victories. But I always like to observe what grace there is, or isn't, in the wake of a loss. Picture the cleanup hitter on the home team up to the plate. Bottom of the ninth, one run behind, one man on, two outs, 3 and 2. He craves being the walk-off home run hero. Instead, he strikes out – on a called strike. Game over. Furious at the call, he breaks the bat over his knee. That says it all. You didn't deserve to be a hero anyway, buddy, if that's how you behave. He craved success. Now all he has is scorn.

Here in Mark's Gospel, we find the disciples coveting success in an embarrassing way at the least opportune time. Right before this, Jesus shares with them, for the third time, what must happen to him – what his destiny will be at the hands of the politicians and angry mobs in Jerusalem.

Once again the disciples can't handle it, or at least, they're not listening, because – maybe because Jesus mentions his death – James and John jump past all the gore to their vision of the life to come. They demand from Jesus that they share in his glory. Then the rest of the disciples get mad at these two because they didn't think of this first. Now James and John will get those coveted spots.

What this tells us is that they all crave success. So much for all the people on the margins to whom they've been ministering. All they can think is, give us glory in the world to come. They all want to be winners. This is exactly the kind of behavior Jesus has been condemning the Pharisees for all this time. So he must set the disciples straight: Whoever wishes to be great among you must be your servant. As he said last week, "Many who are first will be last, and the last will be first."

This is not as enigmatic as it sounds. All we need to grasp it is an example of graceful losing and the effect that has on those who are paying attention. I can't think of a better illustration than the extraordinary photo of College of Wooster pitcher Mark Miller walking off the field after having thrown every pitch in Wooster's 12-inning, 3-2 loss to St. Thomas in the 2009 Division 3 national championship.

You might be wondering, small college in Ohio, D3, 15 years ago – who cares? In fact, this incident was etched in baseball history because of how Miller accepted the heartbreaking loss, and because an alert college staff photographer just happened to capture the moment.

We were paying attention because our daughter was a student there at the time and her then-boyfriend and now-husband Greg joined the team the following year.

This photo by Wooster's Matt Dilyard shows Mark Miller walking off the mound after giving up the game-winning run. With players from St. Thomas mobbing one another in the background, Miller emerges in the foreground, stoic and dignified. The entire composition of the photo is breathtaking, with its contrast of colors and modes of movement. The brilliant gold of the Wooster jersey against a background of purple and black. Miller walking with a measured pace toward the viewer while the Tommies fall on one another behind him.

Until that loss, Wooster had been the hottest team in college baseball. Like all their fans, the photographer, Matt Dilyard, was stunned and discouraged in the aftermath. That night he sadly began the routine transmission of his photos to the copy desk, but as soon as he saw this one he knew he had a winner.

It quickly made the national news. The editor of Sports Illustrated called it one of the best baseball photos he had ever seen, featured it in a double spread two weeks later, and went on to include it in the expanded edition of SI's "The Baseball Book" – the only college photograph in the entire volume. In failure, Mark Miller and Matt Dilyard found success.

The batter who craves glory. The pitcher who accepts humiliation. This sermon could just as well have been called "The Surprising Success of Failure." Whatever photos of the Tommies were taken that night did not make national news, nor were they included in an iconic collection of some of baseball's best images. It was the grace and dignity with which Mark Miller accepted the loss that has remains etched in the minds of many of us, even 15 years later.

Here in Mark's Gospel, Jesus knew how to respond to the disciples' bizarre and inappropriate demand – with irony. He pointed out that their request for greatness and glory echoed the powerful Roman overlords who oppressed the Jews with taxes, who exploited them, and who would execute Jesus in a few days. "You know that those who are regarded as rulers of the Gentiles lord it over them, and their high officials exercise authority over them. Not so with you" – and here we dare to imagine his voice dripping with something like sarcasm.

In keeping with upside-down life in the kingdom of God, Jesus reversed this common pattern of human behavior. Genuine human greatness isn't characterized by domination, political power, schemes to control and subjugate people for your own advantage, or the egotistical grasp for glory, Jesus said, but by self-sacrificial service to others.

There is no better illustration of this in all of scripture than the parable of the good Samaritan. The one who gave himself for the life of another, interrupting his journey, freely sharing quantities of precious oil and wine, and asking the innkeeper for an open-ended bill at that could have easily led to him being overcharged, were all signs of what Jesus calls us to do. We are not to think of our own glory in whatever the undertaking, but to consider what is the best expression of the love and sacrificial giving that defines the kingdom of God that Jesus proclaimed.

How is God calling you in this way? Through increased giving to the church, which our Finance team would be very happy for you to share via a pledge card? Through involvement in one of our existing or new outreach ministries? If you're not sure which, I recommend the new Party Committee, I mean, Fellowship Committee, being organized by Cathy Farrell.

Even with all this, we always return to Jesus' own life, teaching, death, and resurrection as the best demonstration of the true nature of human greatness. To his followers his death seemed to spell failure. Yet in taking the form of servant, to quote Paul, "God highly exalted him and gave him the name that is above every name."

Now his teaching can ring true in our ears: "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many.