

“The Third Temptation: Success at all Costs”  
*The Cost of Discipleship Series, Sermon III*  
 Psalm 95:1-7 and Matthew 4:1-11

A person of financial means was once considering whether or not he would support the Christian mission in Calcutta. He asked Mother Teresa the question that donors usually want to know. He asked, “How do you measure the success of your work?” Mother Teresa looked puzzled and then replied, “I don’t remember that the Lord ever spoke of success. He spoke only of faithfulness.

Now who among us wants to argue with the late Mother Teresa? Her name has become nearly synonymous with “exemplary faithfulness” in this life. Mother Teresa rarely spoke of success; she did not seem to have much interest in it, *per se*. But, it is a fair question, “Was Mother Teresa successful, nonetheless?” “By this world’s standards, was she successful?”

Of course she was. In the 1970’s she was already internationally famed as a humanitarian. In 1979 she was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize. At the time of her death in 1997, the Mother Teresa Missionaries of Charity had grown to 610 missions in 123 countries. Her organization included hospice and homes for people with HIV/AIDS, leprosy, and tuberculosis. Her missions had expanded to family counseling programs, orphanages, schools, as well as the soup kitchens. And finally, after her death Mother Teresa was beatified by Pope John Paul II. Was she successful? Who could argue otherwise? Very few people in the history of modern missions have been as successful, in terms of reaching the poor and the helpless in practical ways.

But back to her own answer. What did *she* count as success? It wasn’t the size of her ministry; and it certainly was not the awards and the recognition, however deserved they were. Let me quote from her own diary in her first year of working with the poor. She had no income and had to resort to begging for food and supplies. Teresa was human. She experienced doubt, loneliness and the temptation to return to the comfort of the convent. Here are her words:

“Our Lord wants me to be a free num covered with the poverty of the cross. Today I learned a good lesson. The poverty of the poor must be so hard for them. While looking for a home I walked and walked till my arms and legs ached. Then the comfort of Loreto (her former convent) came to tempt me. And the tempter kept on saying, ‘You have only to say the word and all that will be yours again.’”

And then she ends that day’s diary with these closing words, “Of free choice, my God, and out of love for you, I desire to remain and do whatever be your Holy will in my regard. I did not let a single tear come.” Success in Mother Teresa’s mind was in this...she did not quit when it was reasonable to do so. She was successful in her faithfulness.

And so it is that our scripture this morning addresses the third temptation of Jesus in the wilderness. “The devil took Jesus to a very high mountain and showed him all the kingdoms of the world and their splendor; and he said to him, “All these I will give you, if you will fall down and worship me.” And Jesus said to him, “Away with you, Satan!”

And that was that! ...Or was it? It may seem strange to us that this third temptation appears to be so blatantly obvious. Of course Jesus is not going to fall down and worship Satan! What is so subtle or powerful about this third and final temptation of Jesus by the Devil?

The first temptation in the desert was about needing food when Jesus was famished with hunger. We can understand that. An anxiety common within humankind nearly always arises when our basic needs are at risk. The second temptation was about needing the assurance of Yahweh’s presence when Jesus faced pain and humiliation. We can understand that temptation, as well. A fear common to us all arises when our emotional needs and our sense of well-being are at risk. These first two encounters with the Devil were truly difficult temptations. Both of them severely tested how Jesus would use his power in this world. But, what about this third temptation?

Well, contrary to how it reads, biblical scholars believe that this third temptation is the most subtle and powerful of them all. It goes beyond the physical and emotional parts of our being—this is the temptation that goes to the heart of our spirituality. I have come to believe that it is the most often failed temptation in modern society, even among Christians.

Did some of you ever hear about a “hair-eating doll?” About a dozen years ago, when my daughter, Andrea, was in Middle School the Associated Press announced a safety recall for a toy doll. The main feature of the doll was a mechanical mouth that chewed on plastic carrots and French fries. Unfortunately the doll couldn’t tell the difference between plastic vegetables and children’s hair. During the first five months that the doll was on the market, the Consumer Product Safety Commission received thirty-five complaints from parents whose children had their hair snarled in the gears located inside the doll’s throat.

The point I want to make is this. Some things that appear quite harmless or even attractive can entangle us and spiritually harm us. The third temptation of Christ came in a very attractive package! It is the temptation to see visible and measurable success as more important than our faithfulness to Kingdom ethics. Said in a different way, it is the modern tendency, even in the church, to believe that effective church growth strategies take precedence over holding firm to a faithful interpretation of the Word of God. It is, in a nutshell, the attitude that says, “You can’t argue with what works”—even if a declining moral standard in our society dictates what will work, or not work, in the church these days.

Jesus could have justified tipping his hat at the devil in the desert. “Why look a gift-horse in the mouth,” as the saying goes. After all, it could be seen as the cost of doing business. Jesus came to heal a broken world; and the world was being offered to him. It was an offer that would be devoid of his suffering and rejection. It was an offer that promised to bring an end to the oppression and harassment of those he loved, immediately. Evil was willing to release its demonic grip on the world. Disease, war, pain and current suffering could suddenly end here on earth. What more could Jesus want to happen in his ministry? Can you imagine the steaks-at-hand? Would not the end results have justified the means?

All it would take was for Jesus to be “reasonable.” All it would take was for Jesus to look the other way—away from what he knew his Father wanted him to do. It would be only the briefest of moments...On the other hand, it would have kept him from the cross.

And that’s the catch. We on earth could have had immediate healing and success here on earth. That was the offer. The cost? It would have cost us our salvation. Without the poverty of the cross, without the blood of Christ poured out on our behalf, not even Mother Teresa in all her ministry successes in this life, would have found salvation.

But Jesus did not fail the test. He did not come to this world alleviate the existence of our immediate pain or social discomfort. He did not come to help a morally bankrupt world feel better about itself with some form of universal “I’m OK, You’re OK” form of theology. He came to enter into our suffering and into our brokenness so that such things would never have the last word.

What exactly happened on the cross, we will never fully know until that day when we see Christ face to face. On that day our eyes will be opened, and we will no longer “see as through a glass darkly,” as said the Apostle Paul. But here is the image I have. Jesus went to the cross with his hands filled. In one hand were our sins—he would leave such things on the cross. In the other hand were our hearts—he would offer those to his Father in Heaven.

Was Jesus successful in the end? Of course he was! But his success can only be defined as his faithfulness in love toward us. Maybe that is where Mother Teresa got the idea. Maybe we, too, are called to redefine what makes us successful. And if we dare to risk doing such a thing, at least we are not alone. May it be so. Amen.