

Measuring Success

September 29, 2019

Luke 16:19-31

What does success look like? This is a question that comes up often enough these days. Some people answer this question with finances in mind (e.g. mortgages and cars are all paid for, you're making millions or even billions of dollars a year, owning lavish mansions and expensive cars, being in that top 1%, etc.). Others answer this question in regards to vocation (e.g. have the title of "Dr." or "headmaster", be your own boss and maybe the boss of others, hold that top position at the place you work, etc.). Still others answer it in regards to lifestyle (e.g. a family that's a certain size and closeness, visited a certain number of countries or seen x number of musicals or plays on Broadway, you're a season ticket holder for your favorite sports team, etc.). While all great answers, and while there is no such thing as a "wrong answer" to this question, today's reading gives us a new interpretation of what "success" looks like.

In the reading today, we have two main characters. The first of these characters that we meet is the rich man. He dressed in fine, purple linens, a line of clothing reserved for those of royalty or the fabulously wealthy. He ate a lavish meal every night, and we can assume he only drank the finest of wines with those lavish meals. He had enough money to go anywhere or do anything he wanted whenever he pleased. His reality was the everyman's dream. In the eyes of modern America, he is the pinnacle of success. However, we are left to wonder, was he truly successful? See, when he died, he didn't go to Heaven. He went to Hades, to this place of eternal torment, a place where he was left in want. He wanted water to parse his burning and dry tongue and lips. He wanted relief from his pain. He wanted to save his brothers from this fate. Everything he took for granted in life, he was in want of, and even speaking to Abraham, his every request is denied, where in life, his every request would have been fulfilled, no questions asked. In the end, we can hear Abraham saying, "Oh how the mighty have fallen."

On the flip side of this equation, we have Lazarus, this poor man who owned nothing except the clothes on his back and the sores that covered his body. Here was a man who would have done anything just to eat the crumbs and the scraps left from the rich man's meals. Here was a man who would have done anything to taste a sip of the finest wine the rich man surely drank every night and to have one second with skin as clear of sores as the rich man's skin. As much as he might have wished for these things, they were denied to him. His life was a true Hades. Then, he dies, and he goes to Heaven. He's no longer hungry or thirsty, because he eats with Abraham at the grand feast set out for God's children. He's no longer covered in sores, for he is now pure, made clean. He no longer has dirt on his face, or even a single clogged pore. He doesn't have rags, but rather lavish robes finer than anything found on Earth. Here is the classic "rags to riches" tale.

So, quick summation then: we have Lazarus, a poor man who was in want of something, even a little bit, who in the end, is in want of nothing. Then, we have the rich man, a man who, in life, had everything he could possible want and more, who took everything in life for granted, and who, in the end, had nothing, was in want of everything. In the end, this story probably makes you reconsider what "success" looks like, and it makes you ask another question: what does success cost? Maybe you have the financial success, but in the process of paying off the

loans, you had to work 80 hours a week without any time for family or friends. Notice how the rich man in this story mentions his brothers, but doesn't mention a wife or children. He was fabulously wealthy, but he may not have had a wife or kids as a result. Maybe you have the family and friends, but you're still scraping pennies together and living paycheck to paycheck. Maybe you've gone on all the trips you could possibly want, but you have no one to share the experiences with. It makes you wonder, if this is success, is success worth it, and did it really matter in the end? Sounds like a very bleak moral to the story, right?

The other direction one can take this story is to consider how this story teaches us how to be successful. So far we have been discussing "success" in regards to what we have, whether it be finances, relationships, experiences, etc. This is the same mistake that the rich man makes: he measures his success by how much he has, how lavishly he can live his life. What if I were to tell you that success isn't about what you have, but what you give? The rich man had much, but he gave nothing. Lazarus had nothing, but we can assume he gave all he had to hoping and praying for salvation, to having faith in God Almighty and to God's righteous and just plan for his life. This passage teaches us to measure success not in what we have, but in what we give. You have the lavish riches, but are you putting that money towards helping those less fortunate than yourself? You have the life experiences, but are you sharing the wisdom gained through those experiences with others in an attempt to make the world better? I like to think this story teaches us how to be successful, that success is measured not in what we make or what we already have, but in what we give, both physically and spiritually. So, I ask you, how successful have you been, and what can you do to be more successful if you aren't successful already?