

The Great Business of Living

Twenty-Fifth Sunday in Ordinary Time
Year B

Homily Notes

Some years ago there was a musical comedy on Broadway
called *How to Succeed in Business Without Really Trying*.

It was about a young man who got a job as an office boy.

He emptied the waste baskets and did other menial tasks

But by using trickery and flattery

he got one promotion after another

and finally ended up as C.E.O.

It was all done in good humor, of course.

But it was also a commentary on how our society understands success.

We might expect that kind of thinking from the world.

But today, we are in Church

where a different set of values should prevail.

This is the time and place

for us to reconsider the whole concept of success.

No one wants to fail.

All of us like to succeed in the great business of living.

But we need to know what that means.

You heard about the man who climbed the ladder of success

only to discover that it was leaning against the wrong wall.

That can really happen to a person.

A friend said of Ernest Hemingway,

“He was a success at everything except life.”

My concern is that it not be true of me or of you.

Each of us has only one life to live.

We do not want to come to the end

and discover that our ladder

was leaning against the wrong wall.

Most of us would agree that the great expert on life is Jesus.

He knew how to live.

In a few short years, he built a life

that has made a lasting impact on the world.

What did success mean to him?

Our gospel reading tells us about a day

when he talked on this all important subject to his disciples.

They were no less confused about what success in life meant

than we are.
Their goal in life was to gain prominence and prestige.

A debate broke out among them
as to who was the most important.
No doubt, every one of them aspired to that position.
Jesus overheard that argument and told them how to settle it.
He said:

**“Whoever wants to be first
must be last of all and servant of all” (Mark:35)**

Let me tell you a story.
An old monk prayed many years
for a vision from God to strengthen his faith,
but it never came.
He had almost given up hope when one day a vision appeared.
The old monk was overjoyed.
But then, right in the middle of the vision,
the monastery bell rang.
The ringing of the bell meant it was time to feed the poor
who gathered daily at the monastery gate.
It was the old monk’s turn to feed them.
If he failed to show up with food,
the unfortunate people would leave quietly,
thinking the monastery had nothing to give to them that day.
The old monk was torn between his earthly duty
and his heavenly vision.
But, before the bell stopped ringing,
the monk made his decision.
With a heavy heart, he turned his back on the vision
and went off to feed the poor.
Nearly an hour later, the old monk returned to his room.
When he opened the door, he could hardly believe his eyes.
There in the room was the vision, waiting for him.
As the monk dropped to his knees in thanksgiving,
the vision said to him,
**“My son, had you not gone off to feed the poor,
I would not have stayed.”**

That story bears a striking resemblance to today’s gospel.
The monk, like the disciples,
learned the most important spiritual lesson of his life.
He learned that the best way to serve God
is not necessarily to give up everything.
He learned the best way to serve God

is not necessarily to turn our back on the world
and go off to a monastery.

He learned the best way to serve God
is not necessarily to spend hours in prayer
contemplating heavenly visions.

**The best way to serve God is to do something far more basic.
The best way to serve God is to reach out in service,
especially to those less gifted than ourselves.**

Jesus taught his disciples this lesson
“Whoever wants to be first must be last of all
and be the servant of all.”

Who have been the most important people in your life?
Most of them, I dare say, were neither rich nor famous.
And even if they were both rich and famous,
those were not the things that mattered.
I can't tell you the names of the truly important people in your life,
but I can tell you what they did.

They took care of you when you could not take care of yourself.
They taught you to read and write.
They spent time with you when you were lonely.
They corrected you when you went astray.
They encouraged you in the right path.
The most important people in your life have been those who helped you.
Those who helped you to be gentle with yourself.

In other words, they were your servants.

So the strange concept of Jesus is not so strange after all:
the meaning of success is service.

“I don't know what your destiny will be.
But one thing I know,
the only ones of you who will be really happy
are those who sought and found how to serve.”

Albert Schweitzer

This homily is excerpted with permission from
Homilies for the Whole Community: Wisdom from a Pastor's Heart- Year B
(New London, CT: Twenty-Third Publications, 2007)
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Available in the homily resource center at www.ThePastoralCenter.com