

## 22<sup>nd</sup> Sunday of Ordinary Time “Imagine Success”

Fr. Frank Schuster

My friends, how do you define success? How would you define a successful life? Let's all close our eyes for a moment and imagine what we would look like if we were successful? What would your house look like? What would your children or spouse be like? What would my waistline look like? What would your life be like? Name concrete examples of what a successful life looks like for you. Get a picture of that in your mind. I think this is an important spiritual exercise, as you will see in a moment. On the other hand, if your answer to this question was, my life is successful just the way it is. Congratulations! Good for you! I think we all want that for ourselves. However, you are not off the hook either. Ask yourself, why did you answer in this way? Articulate in your mind a few examples of why you feel like your life is successful right now? Picture it in your mind.

The reason why I am asking all of us to consider our definition of success is because our definition of success and the bible's definition of success don't always see eye to eye. Take our first reading for example. Jeremiah laments, “All the day I am an object of laughter; everyone mocks me.” Why was Jeremiah an object of laughter? Why did everyone mock him? The reason for this was because he was doing God's will. Imagine for a moment to consider how that would feel right now, to be an object of laughter, for everyone to mock you? It wouldn't feel good, would it?

In our second reading, St. Paul tells us, “to offer your bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, your spiritual worship.” It is important to understand what Paul meant by the word “sacrifice” in this context. He is referring to the actual sacrifices that were conducted on the temple altars of his time that everyone listening to him would have known about. It is not a pleasant image. He is telling us to offer our bodies as a living sacrifice, holy and pleasing to God, our spiritual worship. Doesn't really sound like fun, does it?

And, just in case if we misunderstood what St. Paul was saying, we have our Lord himself challenging his disciples in our Gospel reading, “Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me.” What is Jesus talking about when he says take up your cross and follow him? He is talking about that. He is talking about the cross. Does he look successful to you? And yet, Jesus is the most successful person the world has ever known.

Remember last week, Jesus asked his disciples, “Who do you say that I am?” This is the most fundamental question we can ever ask if we call ourselves Christians: who is Jesus for me? Peter shined like the prince of apostles he is by answering correctly, “You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.” This week we discover that after Peter's bright and shiny moment, he simultaneously answered the question incorrectly. And, it underscores why the final exams for neurosurgeons should never be multiple choice. Peter got the answer correct, but he also got the answer wrong. Peter was thinking Jesus

was going to be the new King David. He thought that Jesus was going to liberate Israel from all oppression. He thought Jesus was going to usher in a new era of prosperity and peace for his country. Peter believed all this because if Jesus was the messiah, that is what he had in his mind what a successful messiah would look like.

What was Jesus' definition of a successful messiah? Jesus says, "He must go to Jerusalem and suffer greatly from the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed and on the third day be raised." That is what success looks like. And, what was Jesus' definition of a successful disciple? "Whoever wishes to come after me must deny himself, take up his cross, and follow me. For whoever wishes to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."

My friends, I think it is appropriate every so often to soul search and ask ourselves the question, how do I define success? In our society, people who have bigger homes, better cars, better clothes, perfect spouses, perfect waistlines, and children without acne, are all somehow seen as more successful. The bible however defines success in a different way. Success in the bible is about doing God's will, period, come what may, even if this requires we have to suffer for it. Or as St. Paul tells us in our second reading, and this is good advice by the way for anyone suffering from any anxiety right now, from Covid or with what is going on in our country today. St. Paul says this about what success looks like, he says, "Do not conform yourselves to this age but be transformed by the renewal of your mind, that you may discern what is the will of God, what is good and pleasing and perfect." How about that? Maybe it would be a good idea for us all to take some time this week and reflect on what St. Paul is saying here and ask ourselves the question, what does this look like? What does this require of me?