



Sermon of June 13, 1999



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"YOU CAN'T WIN THEM ALL"

Genesis 18:1-15

Matthew 10:2-14

The title of this sermon, "You Can't Win Them All," sounds like what Bruce Bochy might say in the locker room after each game the Padres play. At least the Padres aren't as bad as the 1962 Mets, who managed to lose 120 games that season. The last game of the season in 1962, Joe Pignatano hit a triple play to end the game. It was a wonderful ending for an infamous season of the Mets.

Casey Stengel was the manager of the Mets that year. After that last game, he called the team together in the locker room, and said, "Fellers, don't feel bad about this. It's been a team effort all the way."

"You Can't Win Them All" sounds like baseball wisdom. But I would like to point out to you

that it is also biblical. It was Jesus' advice to his disciples. It is our lesson for this morning, the 10th chapter of Matthew, Jesus' instruction to his disciples.

They are about to go out on their first solo mission, the first time they will be on their own without the Master with them. He tells them where to go, what to do, what to take with them. He concludes with this instruction.

And whatever town or village you enter, find out who is worthy in it, and stay with him until you depart. As you enter the house, salute it. And if the house is worthy, let your peace come upon it; but if it is not worthy, let your peace return to you. And if any one will not receive you or listen to your words, shake off the dust from your feet as you leave that house or town.

It is an incredible instruction. For me, it was a liberating one. It seems to give us permission to fail.

When I started out in my vocation as a minister, I just assumed with all my degrees and ordinations that success was inevitable, and that my first church would recognize this finely honed theological instrument, and respond accordingly.

My first church had about 180 members in it when I went there. Three years later when I left they had 150 members. I wondered what went wrong. I did everything that I could. I worked as hard as I could. But they just sat there, immovable. I thought, maybe I am in the wrong profession. I went to the superintendent to talk it over with him. He confessed, "We were thinking of closing that church. We just thought we would give you a chance, see what happens." I was sent to close the church. I couldn't even do that very well. It limped on for another few years. The Sylmar earthquake finally put it out of its misery.

I didn't pay any attention to this text in those days, but it would have been helpful to me if I had seen the meaning of this passage for my situation. It was not until some years later that another preacher revealed the insight in the text. It is for those who try to be faithful disciples who try their best and just cannot do it. The advice of our Lord is, "If no one will receive you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet and move on."

The Tony Awards were on television this last week. Brian Dennehy won the best actor for his re-creation of the role of Willy Loman in *Death of a Salesman*, one of the great American classics. All this year, as they anticipated the opening of that play on Broadway, newspapers, magazines, and commentators have been talking about *Death of a Salesman*, by Arthur Miller. It is an amazing phenomenon. It's on Broadway again, sold out. You can't get tickets to it. It's played over and over and over again these last forty years in America; read by students in high school and college. It has been made into a movie four times, I think. I believe its power is due to the fact that it speaks directly to one of America's most powerful myths; that success is a possibility for everybody if you just work hard.

We worship success in America. If this were ancient Israel, the prophets would call "success" an idol. Like all idols, it demands sacrifices. I have known people to sacrifice all kinds of things to success, such as ideals, honesty, integrity, conscience, relationships, marriages, families.

It's an idol. And few dare criticize it. There are a few prophets in the land who say success is an idol that makes ultimate demands upon us, but cannot deliver what it promises. Arthur Miller was one of them by showing that Willy Loman gave everything, tried and tried to attain the American dream of success, tried to live up to this cultural myth that anyone, in any situation, if you simply work hard, will be able to find success in whatever you attempt.

The more popular forms of Christianity in our day are those preach Christian faith as if it were some simple formula for success. Some of the most popular self-improvement books, I notice, on sale in the bookstores picture Jesus as dispensing advice on how to make it big in this world. Which is quite a trick, since if there was one thing that was consistent in Jesus' teaching it was to give away everything that you have to the poor, take up a cross, and follow me. That is not the kind of advice that you frame and put on the wall.

Jesus did not promise success in this world. He promised that we would triumph over this world. He told his disciples, "You should be in the world, but you should not be of it." By the "world," he meant those values that become idols, like success, that demand so much from us. By the "world," he meant false promises that lead you away from the kind of life that God created you to live. And by the "world," he meant the deception that seduces you into believing that your happiness depends on something that is transitory, metallic, and consumable, rather than that which is genuine, human, and enduring.

In the Gospel of John, in his farewell speech, Jesus prays to God. He prays for you and me. "I do not pray that thou shouldst take them out of the work, but that thou shouldst keep them from the evil one."

What did he mean by that? He meant that the world, and its values, have become idols, like success. They promise to give you life. But, in fact, they demand your life in what you sacrifice to them. Jesus did not teach us how to be successful in this life. He taught us how to overcome this life. He taught us how to be triumphant in this life, especially in those things that threaten to take life away from us.

One of those things is failure. The advice that he gives us, in our text for this morning, is, if you have done your very best, and you have failed, and if you have the best intentions, and you keep trying, and you get no response, nothing happens, don't keep beating against the door, or beating up on yourself. "Shake the dust off your feet and move on."

There will be times when you fail. That is what it means to be a human being. There will be places where you are not going to be welcome. You can't do anything about that. There will be times when people won't like you. There will be relationships that just won't work out. And after trying as hard as you can, and it is not going to work, then "shake the dust off your feet and move on."

There is a fascinating example of this in the Acts of the Apostles. It is the story of Barnabas and Paul. If anyone ought to get along in this world, it's apostles. Barnabas and Paul were both apostles. That meant they were commissioned to teach about Jesus and his love. They are supposed to go out and teach about forgiveness, reconciliation, and all that.

They had a wonderful friendship, Paul and Barnabas. In fact, Paul needed a friend, and Barnabas was there. Paul, the notorious persecutor of the Christians, was converted by the people he was persecuting. He became a Christian himself. He felt called to be a minister, to preach. Only he needed the endorsement of the Church Fathers in order to do it. He went to Jerusalem to get it. They wouldn't even see him. They didn't trust him. They said, "No, we won't even talk to him." But Barnabas, one of the Church Fathers, befriended Paul, spoke for him before the council, got him into the Church, and a wonderful friendship was established.

They had a lot in common. They were both immigrants to Jerusalem, both Gentile Jews. Barnabas was born in Cyprus, and Paul was from Tarsus, not too far apart. They shared the same theology. They believed the same thing about who Christ was and what Christ had come to do. They agreed on a lot of things.

So when the opportunity came for Paul finally to get work as a Christian missionary, Barnabas ran to him with this good news. He was joyful that at last his friend Paul could become a missionary of the Church. And then just the two of them travelled around the Mediterranean together. I tell you, you've got to be good friends to travel around the world together. They did that. They came back to Jerusalem. They reported. They began making plans for a second journey. And that's when it happened.

Barnabas said, "Let's take Mark with us this time."

Paul said, "No. Absolutely not. He's not going with us. He's too immature. He's got to grow up. Remember, he started with us on this last journey, then he dropped out, left us in the lurch. He's too immature."

Barnabas replied, "Mark is the most promising young person we have in this movement. We can't lose him. We've got to take him with us."

Paul said, "No."

The argument got hotter. Then the text says, "The dispute was so sharp they parted company." That's the common translation. The Jerusalem Bible puts it even stronger. "After a violent quarrel they parted company."

Can you imagine that? "A violent quarrel." These are apostles! They are the ones who are supposed to go out preaching reconciliation, peace. There was some dispute even among the saints. That's shocking. As Christians we're supposed to love everybody. We're supposed to get along with everybody, especially with fellow Christians.

I believe that strongly. I have tried to preach that, and I have tried to practice it in my own life. I have spent time trying to bring people together who are alienated from each other, trying to get people to overcome their differences so that we can be one in Jesus, one in the Lord.

Here are two apostles, Barnabas and Paul, violently disagreeing, and then deciding they had better go their separate ways. On the second missionary journey, Barnabas took Mark with him, and Paul took Silas.

They tried it. They tried to get along. They tried to make up. But they failed. There is nothing here about them going to sensitivity training. Nothing here about them going to workshops to learn interpersonal relations. They just accepted the fact that there was a difference between them. They respected that difference, and departed with dignity.

I also want to point out, they stayed in the Church. It's possible for people who disagree to stay in the Church with a common loyalty to our Lord, but agree to disagree. There are times when you are going to fail to be reconciled with someone. I mean, it's just not going to work. The example of Paul and Barnabas is held up so that you will be able to walk away from that with dignity, accepting what has happened, accepting God's forgiveness, not branding yourself as a failure, not punishing yourself because you have not lived up to some ideal.

This is a lesson for those who are conscientious about following Christ. This is not for those who don't even try. You are supposed to try, and try hard. It is for those who have a particularly uneasy conscience about trying and not being able to love their neighbor as they are instructed to do.

When I was the pastor of another church, many years ago, a woman called me on the phone. I could hear her crying, obviously very distraught. She asked if I would come over and talk with her, which I did. She was a fine Christian woman, much more sensitive than most of us. She confessed that she did not like her neighbors. She felt that she was being unChristian. She had this terrible guilt that she had lived with for the longest time. She couldn't stand it any longer. She said she wanted to like them, she tried to like them, but she just couldn't do it.

I asked her to tell me about it. She revealed that over the years they had insulted her, abused her, and ridiculed her. They stored junk cars in their driveway next door to her. They put one of those junk cars on the street in front of her house. She asked them to remove it. They refused to do it. They played rock and roll music all day and all night, big loud speakers. They used obscene language in front of her children. She objected to that. They rejected every attempt that she made to be friends with them. She felt she had failed.

It's true. She had failed. But she had no need to feel guilty, because she had done all that she was required to do. She followed Jesus' teaching over and over again to love your neighbor. She followed Jesus' teaching over and over again to turn the other cheek. Now it was time for her to follow another teaching of Jesus. "If anyone will not receive you or listen to your words, shake the dust off your feet and move on."

The disciples were like that woman. They were serious about being Christian, they were hard working about being Christian, they were conscientious trying to follow Jesus' teachings that they should love everybody. I am sure that is why Jesus chose them. He knew that they were that kind of persons. And it is why you are attracted to Jesus, too. You are also that kind of sensitive person. You want to do the right thing, and you are willing even to make sacrifices in order to do the right thing.

Jesus knew what kind of people the disciples were. So as he sends them out on their first solo mission, and as he sends us out to be Christians in the world, he reminds us, you may fail, because what you are asked to do is not easy. So be prepared to be rejected. Be prepared to

make mistakes. Be prepared to say the wrong thing. Be prepared to fall back into patterns that you are not proud of. Keep trying. But if it does not work, remember his advice, and move on.

I started with a story about Casey Stengel. Let me finish with him. Most people remember him from his glory days with the New York Yankees in the 50s, when they won all those titles and world championships. Most don't remember that Casey Stengel coached the Mets, and lost 162 games. Even fewer people know that he coached the Boston Braves, where one year he lost 92 games. In fact, Casey Stengel lost more games than he won. And yet he is considered one of the immortals in that sport, instructing us that you can't win them all, so you better learn how to lose some.

Jesus gave us this advice on how to do it. "Shake the dust off your feet and move on."

*Help us to be masters of ourselves,
that we might be servants of others,
through Christ our Lord. Amen.*

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