

“What is Success?”

Luke 1:50-53

In her song of praise, the Magnificat, Mary links together two words that our greater culture would probably assume are mutually exclusive: mercy and fear. God is indeed merciful, kind, generous, and forgiving. He also has high expectations of how we are to receive and revere Him. Just as it is in His nature to be merciful, kind, generous, and forgiving; His Law demands the objects of His mercy and forgiveness to be humble, submissive, devoid of personal pride, and full of fear and reverent awe toward Him.

As sinful human beings, it is not in our nature to be humble, to place the needs of others before our own, to willfully submit out of love and give up our individuality, to relinquish our prideful inmost thoughts. But God sends us His Holy Spirit, cleanses us of our original sin in Baptism, feeds us and strengthens us through Word and Sacrament so that we have the strength to be weak in the world.

The proud will be scattered; the rulers will be brought down; those who claim to have no fear will bend on trembling knee. St. Paul tells us, "Every knee shall bow in heaven and on earth and under the earth, and every tongue confess that Jesus Christ is Lord."

Last week, I was talking with Annalisa and Julianna as they are each at pivotal points in their career arc, and I asked them, "In your mind's eye, looking forward to your later years in life, what do you think you would need to see happen in your life for you to be able to look back on your life as being a success?" And that question spurred on a very good conversation, which was my intention.

When most people think of a successful life, they think of the things that Mary rebukes. Parents say to their children, "Make me proud." Mary says, "He has scattered the proud."

When I was a young man, I dreamed of doing mighty deeds. Years ago, my daughters have dreamed of being princesses. Mary says, "He has brought down the mighty who sit on thrones" and has exalted the humble. No one dreams of being humble. I dreamed about catching the winning touchdown in the Super Bowl. Then God gave me the body of an undersized lineman.

People of all ages dream of being rich. I mean, someone is buying all of those Powerball tickets. Mary says, “The rich He has sent away empty.”

What is a successful life? Mary says, “His mercy is for those who fear Him from generation to generation.”

We have been shown unspeakable mercy and kindness. He is our salvation. And the Lord God is to be feared.

Now fearing the Lord is not always the trembling in your boots kind of fear that would certainly be the result of standing before the throne of God confronted with the guilt of your sin. Fear of God is also presented in Scripture as involving a reverent awe of the majesty and power of God. But it is not simply one or the other. It is both. Unfortunately, most people in our world have lost both kinds.

God is no longer feared; our Father in heaven is no longer revered and very few even try to treat Him with the majesty He deserves. He is just the “Man upstairs,” a generic power in the universe. He’s “the Big Guy in the sky.”

The saying holds true that familiarity breeds contempt. There is great danger in assuming a familiarity with God that in any way reduces His majesty, His importance, and the reality that He is our Judge.

Fear and mercy. Mary understood their connection. She feared God. And when the angel Gabriel came and said, "Fear not," Mary submitted herself to the Lord's will, listened to His Word, and in faith accepted the hard road that the Lord laid before her.

As a humble servant, she allowed herself to be made shameful in the eyes of the world. She was brought low, laughed at, and greatly strained her relationship with her own family so that the Lord's will would be done in her life. A teenage girl who "has to get married" in that culture had a rough road in front of her. She was not the poster-child for success in Galilee.

Yet, all generations call her blessed. What constitutes success in life? Success is not determined by being rich or mighty or having reasons to be proud. The mark of true success in life is having the fear of the Lord, which Scripture says is the beginning of wisdom, and through faith in Him whom we fear, love, and trust above all things, we receive mercy. As Mary said, "He who is mighty has done great things for me." Amen.