

Centre Congregational Church, United Church of Christ

The Rev. Dr. Scott Couper

Sunday, March 7, 2021

Third Sunday in Lent



“Seeing Ministry as God’s Success, Not Ours”

Third of six in a series during Lent entitled

“Biblical Optometry: Discerning Our Church's 'Corrective Vision'”

Scripture: I Kings 19:11-18

This morning’s sermon is difficult for me to preach. It is difficult because the scripture runs counter to that which I intuitively think and feel. You see, I, and perhaps you as well, believe in ‘meritocracy’. For example, I believe that if I do all the right things as a minister (if I work seven days a week, if I answer all my e-mails, if I make everyone happy, and if I preach good sermons) then our ministry will succeed. But, after I read our scripture, I ask, where is ‘faith’ in that equation? Hmm? There is little ‘faith’ in meritocracy. There is little faith in the “if I do this, then that will be the outcome”. This morning’s scripture speaks a message with which I have much difficulty because it communicates to us that God’s power, and not Elijah’s power, was the determinant for any so-called

success in ministry. And so it is with Centre Church. The story of Elijah teaches us that we are called not necessarily to be successful. Rather, we are called to be faithful.



We often see the success of our calling or the success of our ministry as dependent entirely on what we do, on the strategies and tactics we employ. That which is seemingly efficacious is the only criteria we use to determine if any given course of action is suitable. Yet, we often try the same things over and over again and still see the church in decline.

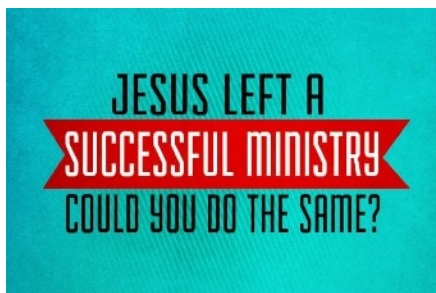


The feeling that God's work is entirely dependent on us is a terrible burden to bear. We are incarcerated and weighted down by this burden. It is not the LRPT's and Bob Pu's responsibility to save our church. It is not the minister's job to save the church. We place on ourselves an impossible expectation that cannot be fulfilled when we believe our church's success is

entirely 'up to us'. God does not necessarily call us to be successful. God calls us to be faithful. God calls us to listen, to respond, and to thus be obedient.



If Elijah concluded he had any success in his ministry, it is because he did that which he probably thought, not only would be unsuccessful but also, was pretty crazy. Ultimately, it was the Holy Spirit and God's power that surprisingly rendered successful that which was probably highly unlikely and thus risky. Though Elijah had a role to play, it was not anything that he necessarily did or did not do that determined the end result.



Jesus the Christ also cannot be said to have had *in his lifetime* a 'successful' ministry. It failed, depending on the gospel account, in one to three years! Jesus was called to be obedient, not 'successful'. God's work is ultimately dependent on God, not necessarily on our own abilities, tactics, or strategies. This morning as we share the meal at the table in the celebration of Holy

Communion, we remember Jesus' obedience and the path that led him to the catastrophic ministry 'failure' that was the crucifixion.

This Lent, let us repent for placing on ourselves the heavy burden of our ministry's success or failure.



This Lent, let us ask forgiveness for hubris - the arrogant and mistaken belief that God's success is dependent on our own capabilities rather than our willingness to follow a vision spoken by the voice of God.

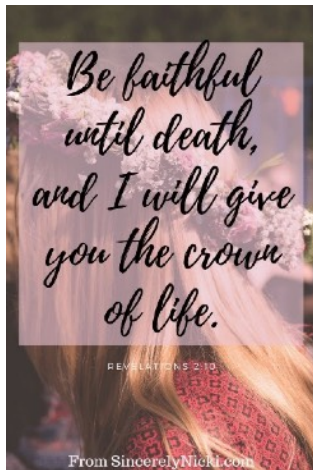
The Long-Range Planning Team's (LRPT) objective should not necessarily be to chart a strategic path for our church's success.



No, The LRPT's role is to hear from us, to listen to us as we listen to the still, small voice of God.

I can confidently preach that God is not necessarily telling us to be successful. I can confidently preach that God's voice is not saying, "Just don't

end-up like the Baptist church across the street”. I can confidently preach God’s voice is not saying, “Your vision is to simply ‘not die’”. I can confidently preach to you that God’s voice is not necessarily saying, “Be successful”. No! God’s voice is saying, “Be faithful”.



Let us together with our friends, our brothers, our sisters on the LRPT discern what God’s voice is saying and what being faithful entails. Let’s do that!

This is the word of God, and it was delivered to the people of God, and the people of God responded, “Amen”.