

Triumph in Christ II Corinthians 2:12-3:6

What would be the pinnacle of success for you? What would be the greatest honor you could receive? In Paul's time it would undoubtedly have been a triumph, a ceremony the Roman Senate would award to an emperor after a significant military victory. For example, the emperor Titus received a triumph when he conquered Jerusalem some 20 years after Paul wrote this letter. Scenes from that triumph were carved on a memorial arch, which still stands in Rome today.

To the Romans, a triumph was the biggest of big deals. The procession would wind through the very heart of Rome, with all the important governmental officials and members of the Senate leading the way. Next would come all sorts of sacrificial animals and lots of prisoners of war. Next, the emperor would ride in a chariot, clothed in the purple and gold symbols of royalty, carrying a laurel branch and an ivory scepter, leading his victorious legions through the streets, as they were cheered by adoring throngs. It was such an overwhelming spectacle that a slave was assigned to ride in the chariot with the emperor, holding a crown above his head and constantly whispering in his ear, "You are mortal."

Do we have any similar celebrations of success today? In sports, I suppose the presentation of the Superbowl trophy among thousands of screaming fans with millions of people watching on TV would come close. In politics, delivering an acceptance speech before a cheering crowd after winning an important election might be somewhat similar.

But what about in the Church? What does Paul mean in verse 14 when he says God causes us to triumph in Christ? I suppose we usually think of a successful church as one with lots of people coming to worship, one with lots of programs designed both to nurture members of all ages and to enable them to do all kinds of service in the community. And of course, a successful church has one of those big-time, big-name preachers to draw in the crowds, preferably with lots of hair and perfect teeth.

Well, however Paul is describing Christian success in today's passage, it sure doesn't look like that. It doesn't look like winning a Superbowl or making an acceptance speech or having a big arch built in your honor, either. In fact, Paul insists over and over throughout this passage that he isn't sufficient, that he isn't adequate to achieve any sort of victory on his own. In fact, the passage begins with a confession, not of Paul's competence and strength, but of his weakness.

Look at 2:12, where Paul says the Lord opened a door for his ministry in Troas, a city in the northwest corner of what we now call Turkey. Now, Troas was in the same province as the city of Ephesus, the town where Paul probably wrote this letter during his extended ministry there as a church planter. And since the Book of Acts tells us that Paul's ministry in Ephesus was marked by miraculous signs and wonders, we would expect ministry opportunities to open up for him in a town so nearby, right? Surely having heard about miraculous healings the crowds in Troas would have flocked to see Paul. Surely that's what a Christian triumph looks like, right?

But instead of putting up a tent and having a successful crusade in Troas, as any modern-day evangelist worth his salt would do, or instead of trying to plant a church there, Paul says he only made a brief visit to that city because he was so anxious to get back to Macedonia. And that's because he wanted to find Titus and get some news from the people in Corinth, probably because he was worried

about all the hard feelings that had passed between them because of those letters Paul had written to them about Church discipline.

What kind of a triumph is that? I mean, it seems like Paul was more interested in shoring up his relationship with the people in a church he had already started than he was in gaining more converts for Christ. He was just going over old ground, patching up errors instead of making bold advances for the gospel. In fact, throughout this whole passage it doesn't sound like Paul has very much confidence at all, at least not in himself. Instead he insists in 3:5 that his sufficiency, his adequacy to handle any of the tasks of ministry only comes from God.

All this means that, to the world outside the Church, and to many within, Paul looked a whole lot less like a conquering emperor than like one of those prisoners of war who was led in a triumphal procession. And in fact the Greek of verse 14 can have either meaning – it can mean we triumph in Christ like an emperor or that we are led in the triumphal procession of Christ like prisoners of war. And given Paul's protestations of weakness, it sure sounds like he has the second meaning in mind.

In fact, in most of this passage, Paul goes out of his way to make it clear that he didn't deserve the credit for anything he had been able to accomplish up to that point in his ministry. Yes, he was a miracle-working apostle who had planted churches all over modern-day Turkey. And yes, he had been the organizing pastor of the Church in Corinth. So, sure, he could have appealed to his own success or his authority, the way a triumphant Roman emperor would.

But instead of hauling out his extensive resume, the first two verses of chapter 3 make it clear that the only thing that mattered to Paul, the only recommendation he wanted was the Corinthian Christians themselves. They themselves were his resume, and his love for them was so great that their names were written in his very heart. In fact, it was because he loved them so much that he was willing to put great ministry opportunities on the back burner in order to make sure his relationship with them was okay.

So, if we were to ask Paul what a triumph looks like in the Church, he probably wouldn't indicate all those things we think are so important – the number of worshippers on Sunday morning or the number of dollars put in the offering plate. Instead, in 3:2 he indicates that a successful church is a church of close relationships, a church where love abounds, a church where love for God and for one another is obvious to everyone.

And even today, it's that sort of love that continues to draw people into the Church. It has long been the case that most people come to worship or to a Sunday school class or small-group Bible study because a friend invites them. But to our increasingly hateful, fragmented, lonely world, when Christians go out of their way to meet one another's needs, when Christians invite other people into their lives and their homes, seeking nothing in return, well, that's positively counter-cultural.

For how did Jesus say the world will know that we are His disciples? Not by sharing His teachings, as important as those are, but by loving one another in the way that He loved us – self-sacrificially and unconditionally. It is this love that truly reveals the heart of Christ to a sin-sick, love-starved world.

So yes, however surprising it may be to us Presbyterians, the most important things to a pastor's ministry aren't his theological degrees or how many commentaries he has read. Sure, a preacher needs

those things just as much as a cook needs his pots or a hunter needs his rifle, but in each case, these are just tools of the trade. No, in today's passage, Paul reminds us that a pastor's greatest credentials for ministry are found not in his head, but in his heart – it is his love for the people and his desire that they grow in the grace of God, it's these things that give power to his preaching. That's why in 3:6, Paul goes so far as to say that the letter of the Law is not the most important thing to a successful ministry.

But if love is more important to than knowledge or skill, even that love isn't sufficient, isn't adequate to guarantee success in a church. That's why in the same verse Paul points to the work of the Holy Spirit. He says it's only the Holy Spirit Who can bring life to those who are spiritually dead.

For let's face it – just transmitting knowledge about Jesus isn't enough to change anyone's life. After all, even though they had walked with Jesus and had eaten with Jesus and had seen Him do miracles for three years, His disciples all abandoned Him on the night He was arrested, no matter how much they knew about Him. And just love for Jesus wasn't enough to make them faithful to Him either – after Peter denied Jesus three times, only a great love for Jesus could have made him weep such bitter tears. But the fact remains that when Jesus died, He didn't have any followers who were willing to die with Him, no matter how much He had taught them, no matter how much they may have loved Him.

But after He arose, when He breathed on those same disciples and gave them the gift of the Holy Spirit, suddenly they were transformed from wimps into warriors for Christ. By the power of the Holy Spirit, they had the desire and the ability to proclaim boldly the truth of the gospel – that Jesus is the long-awaited Messiah, the Son of God; that Jesus is the loving Lamb of God Whose shed blood takes away the sin of all who would trust in Him; that Jesus rose from the dead and ascended into Heaven and that He rules and reigns over everyone and everything on earth; that Jesus will come again in glory to bring perfect justice and peace to the world. That was the good news they preached in the power of the Holy Spirit.

But even such confident, powerful, anointed preaching isn't enough to guarantee success in the Church. No, the Church needs more than loving, knowledgeable, Spirit-filled preachers. According to 3:3, the Church can only succeed if Christ writes these truths on the hearts of those who hear the gospel. And He only does this by the power and the inspiration of the Holy Spirit.

And that's where our love for others, the kind of love that Paul had for the Corinthians, must once again come into play. For we must be in earnest prayer for those who need to know Christ and to know Him better. Even as we show and share the love and truth of Christ with them, we must beg the Holy Spirit to give them new life, to open the eyes of the blind and the ears of the deaf. For at the end of the day, none of us are adequate to save anyone else. None of us is sufficient to bring anyone to faith in Christ. Only the Holy Spirit can do that.

So, no, Paul didn't labor under any delusions that he deserved to be the conquering emperor, for only Jesus deserves that sort of honor. Instead, Paul was perfectly happy just to be part of the parade, no more than a slave of Christ. That's why Paul relished his weakness, that's how he could rejoice in his insufficiency, because he knew that was the only way to true life. In fact, being led in Christ's triumphal procession is the only way any of us can truly triumph over the power of sin and death.

So, what does success look like in the Church? It's not when we experience triumph, but when Christ does. And His victory over sin and death grows every time the Holy Spirit opens the eyes of the

blind and the ears of the deaf, every time our deeds of love and mercy lead others to respond to His gracious call with repentance and faith, surrendering to His might and majesty. So, let's get in step with Jesus and encourage each other to join in His great triumph.