

**PARK HILL UNITED METHODIST CHURCH
FOURTEENTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST
REV. JOHN L. THOMPSON
ABUNDANT LIVING
LUKE 14:1, 7-14
August 29, 2010
10:00 A.M. SERVICE**

The first values we learn are from our parents and siblings. As children we learn the stories and teachings of Jesus in Sunday school. Increasingly, however, the world will compete with God and our families for our attention and our allegiance.

Child psychologists emphasize the importance of teaching children basic lessons in courtesy and good manners. But make no mistake about it; these lessons do not come naturally, unlike self-centeredness. Yet, these lessons become the basis of mature attitudes toward other people in adulthood. Good manners lead to a sense of decency, humility, honor, and propriety.

In our scripture, Jesus used a dinner party to make a spiritual point. As guests, as in life, we are not to scramble for the best seats, lest we be asked to sit somewhere else. It is far better to humbly take a distant seat and then be invited by the host to move to a better place.

Many of the ills of society can be traced to lifestyles that are full of striving. But why? Because the worship of success has become our cultural religion.

Henry David Thoreau asked, **“Why should we be in such desperate haste to succeed, and in such desperate enterprises?”** Most of us know, at least theoretically, that success is an unworthy and dangerous goal. The evidence is all around us. Emily Dickinson wrote that **“Success is counted sweetest / By those who ne’er succeed.”** Yet we are driven, as if by supernatural forces, for reasons we do not fully understand.

Despite the many differences between Jesus’ world and ours, some things were similar. In first century Palestine social occasions involving food, conversation,

and entertainment were not unlike such events today. It was a compliment to be invited, a matter of great interest to see who else was invited, and a place to make an impression. Large and prestigious events, then as now, had the more important guests seated near the host. These arrangements were usually based on wealth and social standing.

Those of modest means were farther away from the host, and slaves were assigned to extremely remote areas, out of sight.

Jesus was invited to the home of a prominent Pharisee for dinner. He watched how the guests angled for the places nearest to the host, and when he was asked to speak, he shared a bit of wisdom. ***“When you are invited to a marriage feast,”*** he said, ***“do not sit in a place of honor. If it is intended for someone more eminent, the host will have you move to a lower place and you will be embarrassed. When you arrive, go and sit in the lowest place. When your host sees you he may say, ‘Friend, go up higher.’ Then you will be honored.”*** Jesus concluded: ***“Those who exalt themselves will be humbled, and those who humble themselves will be exalted.”***

Jesus also had a suggestion for the host. ***“When you give a feast, do not invite only those who have the ability to reciprocate, so that you will be repaid. Rather, invite the poor and the handicapped, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. You will be repaid in the resurrection of the just.”***

Striving can be a good thing or a bad thing depending on its purpose. Striving to reach a worthy goal, or striving to complete a necessary task, or striving to please God, are all admirable. Nothing is achieved without some kind of effort. On the other hand, striving can be foolish, or even misguided. I tried to make that point last week to two young men in my office.

The writer of Ecclesiastes says that ***“all is vanity and a striving after wind.”*** (1:14) We have all known people who were determined to reach a goal that to us seemed morally wrong or foolhardy. Striving to succeed is often based on a failure to understand the true source of one’s worth.

Whether we were born with it or it was put there when we were children, there is something in us that tells us we have to prove ourselves. A deep insecurity whispers that, as we are, we are inadequate. We must do something to earn love and a sense of worth. This sets many people on a lifelong quest to win approval. At the same time, the culture impresses us with the claim that success is the

ultimate good. It may seem that everyone conspires to set us on the road to success, even our teachers. A few years ago an article in the New York Times said of American colleges that **“fads and fashions, the demands of popularity and success, enter where wisdom and experience should prevail.”**

Biblical faith, however, contradicts these messages we grow up hearing. The source of our true worth is God. We were made by the Creator and pronounced **“good.”** We have value and worth both as a creation of God and as a child of God. In Jesus Christ, his sacrificial life and his death, we see the extent of God’s love for us. We are loved even in our sin, and our loving God offers grace and forgiveness. **“For while we were yet sinners, Christ died for us.”** A life of desperate striving misses the point. We are invited to a life of faithful trusting, in our times of failure and of success. William Saroyan said, **“Good people are good because they’ve come to wisdom through failure. We get very little wisdom from success, you know.”**

The opposite of striving for success is not lethargy or laziness, it is service. Striving for success is a self-centered pursuit. Young people are encouraged to envision themselves as **“winners”** and **“champions.”** They hear pep talks about believing in themselves and having self-confidence. Their role models are **“super star”** athletes and celebrities, individuals who already have far more fortune and fame than most of us can even fathom.

Their goals and expectations are so blown out of proportion that they go unprepared into the real world, where striving for success leads primarily to disappointment and failure.

Christ calls us to end our striving, by following him in serving the needs of the world. When we do, our focus gradually turns from self-centeredness to neighbor-centeredness. Our vision shifts from cultural idols to our needy people. Our goals change, from success and “good times” to caring and good work. Ambition and social networking are transformed into a sense of mission and of meaning. Somewhere along the way it actually becomes more **“blessed,”** and joyful, to give than to receive.

Remember Jesus’ idea of a feast, or a dinner party? Invite the poor, the maimed, the lame, the blind, and you will be blessed, because they cannot repay you. It is a revolutionary idea, I know. But it is a redemptive idea, as well.

From the first days of life we are encouraged to imitate others. We model our behavior after the people who are important to us, for good or for ill. Becoming a Christian both extends and transforms this process of imitation. As Paul says, ***“We are transformed by the renewing of our minds in Christ Jesus.”*** With spiritual maturity comes the knowledge that striving for things leaves us empty, while striving to follow Jesus leads to life in abundance.

If you are ready for abundant living in Christ Jesus, I would love to be your pastor. I would love for this to be your church.