

**The Measure of Our Success**  
**Preached by**  
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**August 2, 2018**

**For reflection:** *The level of our success is limited only by our imagination and no act of kindness, however small, is ever wasted.* Aesop

**Hebrew Scripture:** Numbers 3:5-7,15; 4:46-49

Then the Lord spoke to Moses, saying: Bring the tribe of Levi near, and set them before Aaron the priest, so that they may assist him. They shall perform duties for him and for the whole congregation in the front of the tent of meeting, doing service at the tabernacle. Enroll the Levites by ancestral houses and by clans.

All those who were enrolled of the Levites, whom Moses and Aaron and the leaders of Israel enrolled, by their clans and their ancestral houses, from 30 years old up to fifty years old, everyone who qualified to do the work of service and the work of bearing burdens relating to the tent of meeting, their enrollment was eight thousand five hundred and eighty. According to the commandment of the Lord through Moses they were appointed to their several tasks of serving or carrying; thus they were enrolled by him, as the Lord commanded Moses.

**New Testament Reading:** James 2:14-17

What good is it, my brothers and sisters, if you say you have faith, but do not have works? Can faith save you? If a brother or a sister is naked or lacks daily food, and one of you says to them, "Go in peace; keep warm and eat your fill," and yet you do not supply their bodily needs, what is the good of that? So faith, by itself, if it has no works is dead.

**Sermon: The Measure of Success**

Numbers. Think of all the information that comes to us in the form of numbers. The Dow Jones is up (or down) 18 or 100 or 300 points today. The ratio of students to teachers is 20 to 1. Employees were given a 1% raise. 1/3 of the world's children go to bed hungry each day. The GNP increased 4.6 percent in the last quarter. The apple crop is expected to be the same as last year's. The State Fair set a record with over 134,000 in attendance on Saturday.

Numbers. We are inundated with numbers every day—data, often masquerading as information. Those numbers claim to tell us how well or how poorly we are doing in various aspects of our individual and community lives. Numbers can and do tell us some things, but numbers alone are no measure of our success. To say that two runs for president and two losses tell us the measure of a man.

However, in some ways, numbers are a measure of our success and we ignore them at our peril. On the other hand, numbers don't tell the whole story. Particularly in the church, where we practice a faith based on things hoped for and belief in things unseen, a faith where relationships with God and one another are central to all we are and do, we need to be cautious about emphasizing only the tangible outcomes of our ministry together. Such caution is a particular concern for the Protestant branches of the Christian family.

In an effort to overcome misconceptions born in the practices of the church of their time, the Reformers emphasized that we are made right with God by God's will alone. They wanted to dismantle the idea that we earn God's love by doing good, and that we could add up what God owed us as a result of our good deeds, as though there were some cosmic balance sheet in play.

One consequence of that emphasis has been that since the Reformation, we have been unsure and suspicious of the relationship between faith in God and "doing good works." We have been hesitant to claim that faith produces concrete results as well as intangible ones. For that very reason, James' letter to the church, which we heard from this morning, is very rarely read in worship. When it is, often his words on good works are buried in a much larger passage, so we can easily avoid them, if we wish. Yet our tradition, with its emphasis on grace, has never excused us from faith that finds expression in deeds. Calvin himself said of James' letter, "he is attempting only to shatter the evil confidence

of those who vainly pretended faith as an excuse for their contempt of good works."

While we don't have contempt for good works, we may use our faith as a salve for our conscience when we don't do them. We reassure ourselves that God's love for us is unconditional—not dependent on what we do. What we are hoping for is what Michael Marshall calls "'decaffeinated Christianity'—it doesn't keep you awake at night."

Yet because we are a faithful people—our faith does keep us awake at night, wondering if we have made the right decisions; wondering if we have said 'no', when we might have said 'yes.' It's not that we don't want to help at the food bank or give blood or teach church school or be a church officer or sing in the choir. It's that we have other obligations too—to our spouse and our children and our job and our community. We would help if we could, but we don't have the time.

We are faced daily with difficult decisions. No one argues that our choices are easy or straightforward, for our own lives or those of our neighbors. It is easy for us to justify our "no's" to ourselves and others. Between the circumstances of our lives and our assurance that God's love is not determined by our worthiness, we have become adept at mounting theological arguments that excuse us from answering the call to practice our faith. We emphasize the deep faith that fills our hearts and our minds, but is less powerful at moving our hands.

Marian Wright Edelman, Director of the Children's Defense Fund, from whose book, The Measure of Our Success, I borrowed the title of today's sermon, reminds us, "A people unable or willing to share, to juggle difficult competing demands, and to make hard choices and sacrifices may be incapable of taking courageous action to rebuild family and community and to prepare for the future."

By virtue of our faith, by virtue of God's power and Spirit, which are given to us, we are capable of courageous action. By virtue of our faith, we are called to take that action. When we become members of the church, when we become parts of the body of Christ in the world, our capabilities confirmed. When we become members of the church, we promise to use our abilities in service to God and God's people. We tell our new members that they will be invited to participate in events and activities, but should feel free to say "no." If we can't say, "no" our "yes" means nothing. Sometimes that is heard by all of us to mean that the church asks for nothing. That's not true. We acknowledge that we are not all gifted in all things. What the church asks is for each individual to know and share their gifts, choosing appropriate times for them and for the church to do so. Without exception we are all qualified to share the work of this congregation. Without exception we are called and commanded by the Lord to do it.

Listen again to the reading from the Book of Numbers, slightly revised for our day and time:

*All those who were enrolled of the family of God, whom the congregation of the United Church of Fayetteville, and their leaders enrolled, by our clans and our ancestral houses, from 13 years old up to 100 years old, everyone who qualified to do the work of service and the work of bearing burdens relating to the work and ministry of the congregation, our enrollment is nearly 200 persons enrolled and another dozen participating. According to the commandment of the Lord through the congregation we were appointed to our several tasks of serving or carrying; thus we are enrolled, as the Lord commands.*

Numbers don't tell the whole story, but they do tell some of it. There are 200 of us who are qualified and enrolled to do the work of service and the bearing of burdens related to the ministry of the church. Let's consider some of the other numbers that provide measures of our success.

As we hear them, let us also consider whether these are numbers our congregation might publish with pride, or numbers we might wish to footnote with disclaimers. Where does what we say and pray for find expression in the work of our hands? Let us listen too, for our personal accountability. Each of us will hear at least one number where we can take pride in our personal contribution to success; a place where we can be excited about the outcome and our involvement. Each of us will also hear at least one number where we can make a difference; where we can say "yes" when we have said "no"; where we can attend when we have stayed home; where can we lend a hand, where before we have only lent a word; where we can do what we have promised to do. Let us listen to the numbers. What is the measure of our success?

We have nearly 200 members. We have 55 worship services each year. Our average worship attendance is 85 people. The choir has twenty singers most Sundays. We have 13 people serving as members or *ex officio* members of the Board (That may be a little worrisome – the same number of folk at the Last Supper.☺) They are assisted and supported by another 17 officers, committee chairs and countless numbers of committee members –through which we provide nearly one hundred services to church and community, in the form of education, visits, meals, mission –both hands on and with funds, education and community involvement.

We are organized into approximately 100 households. While everyone benefits from the services, benefits and ministries of the church, only about 80 of those households pledge to support our ministry financially.

We have almost 30 birth through Grade 12 children and youth on our rolls. It's not where we'd like to be, but that census is taking an upward turn and the most hopeful element of that number is that the bulk of those young people are in the lower ages—which means we won't see them "age-out" of participation soon as high school graduation approaches. Three people with no children in our church school have worked hard all summer, designing, recruiting and cleaning. Four people are serving as the Adult Education Innovation Team, revamping our Sunday morning offerings and bringing greater integration to the theological and the contemporary socio-political concerns which we face. The Staff Support Committee has been in almost constant session throughout the summer. The Board has been working hard on developing vision for the future, considering upkeep projects and looking forward to congregational desserts and conversation. The membership folk worked on the much-desired pictorial directory. Our traditional low summer attendance of about 50 belies the extraordinary amount of work that has gone on behind the scenes in these months.

Our coming year, in so far as we now know, will include: a bi-monthly mid-week Bible Study and a monthly gathering of a men's covenant group, there will be our three big fellowship events, including outdoor worship and a church picnic, 18-20 coffeehouses, 2 concerts with the Syracuse University Brass Ensemble, two Sundays where the Word will be proclaimed through music, an Intergenerational Church in the World Sunday and a Service Sunday and a Blood Drive. We will gather in celebration with baptisms, weddings and funerals. We share this building with six other organizations on a regular basis and make community space available on an as needed basis.

Those are some of the numbers reflecting the shape and projection of our ministry for the days ahead. Having heard them, what is the measure of our success? Have we, the 200 who are qualified and enrolled to do the work and ministry of the congregation, done as we have been commanded by the Lord? What are the numbers of which we can be proud—personally and as a congregation? What are the numbers that could be improved by our participation and acceptance of responsibility we have already promised to carry out?

The Lord asks us a more important question: As people of the Lord who rejoices in our faithfulness, frees us from the failures of our past, strengthens us for the challenges of the present, and gives us dreams for the future—the Lord asks, what will be the measure of our success next year and in the years to come? Will we continue the service we do well? Will we continue to grow in love and faith? Will we continue to open our hands as well as our hearts to the Spirit of God's generosity? Will we have the courage to let go of models or ministries that are no longer suited to the world we live in? Are we a people able or willing to share, to juggle difficult competing demands, and to make hard choices and sacrifices, without rancor or finger-pointing, with hope and faith, and so are capable of taking courageous action to rebuild family and community and to prepare for the future? What will be the measure of our success?

Let us pray: Lord our God: You have given us all the gifts and more that we need to care for ourselves, and to serve one another and you. By your Spirit, may we trust those gifts, and trust ourselves as you trust us to use them well. Grant us the courage and commitment to do what you call and command us to do. Amen.