

**“A Lesson from a Shiny Tomato”**

**John 17:22-23**

**8/22/10**

**As disciples of Jesus Christ, faithfully sharing God’s love, the world will know that God sent Jesus Christ and that He loves them. In God we will have success.**

Yes, yes. How else can I begin this message than to say that It’s Fair Week once again! All the preparations have been made and everything is set up. Food, fun, and farm animals.

I love checking out all the animals, in part because there are so many and you can get a close up inspection of them. But I know that the people who raise these animals put a lot of work and resources into them. What we see this week comes from at least a year’s worth of labor, if not more.

**Now, how do you measure whether or not you are successful in what you do?** What or whose standard do you use?

What if everyone found out that I secretly slip notes to the judging committee for the animals, telling them which animals I think are most pretty or cool looking and they awarded prizes from that?

Max De Pree tells a wonderful story about those wonderful tomato growers in central California. More successful at tomato growing than the tomato growers of all human history, they grew more tomatoes per acre than anyone ever had. But they did have one problem: How to get their tomatoes into the salad bowls of Chicago and the fruit baskets of the Bronx un-bruised. Because a magnificent bruised tomato, in the hands of the tomato squeezers of the world, is only a bruised tomato.

So they set agrotechnology to work and accomplished two marvelous things. First, they got a machine to pick the tomatoes while they were still yellow but very firm. Then they put the tomatoes on an assembly belt, passed them under a certain kind of light for seven seconds, and they came out a rosy red—a rosy pink, almost red. And then they devised a packaging such that you could put a bunch of tomatoes in a Styrofoam crate, and lift it twenty feet high above solid concrete, and also take a bumper from a Chevy pickup, lift it twenty feet high above solid concrete, drop them both, and the bumper would come off worse than any one of those tomatoes. Agrotechnology wins again.

But they had one problem: The tomato that the chef sliced into his salad in Chicago and the woman bought from the market in Boston didn’t taste the way a tomato was supposed to taste. The true goal of getting the best tasting tomatoes to the chefs and stores of the country was lost. The tomato growers got sidetracked with the means and never reached their desired end.

It’s a lesson from a shiny tomato:

**We can have great success with the means, with all we “do”, but if we forget *why* we do something in the first place then we end with nothing.**

This week I went back and re-read the thoughts some of you shared about what it was you hoped to see happen here at Oakland. There were a lot of good ideas, and many of them we are now doing. But as I read over those notes, the question that kept coming to mind after every idea was “Why?”. We should have one worship service...Why? We

should have more intimacy in our relationships...Why? We should improve our hospitality...Why?

These are all good things I am sure we should be doing, and much more. But before we do anything at all, we must ask ourselves why we are doing it. What are we ultimately trying to accomplish? Because the next step is to then evaluate whether what we have done is a “success” or “failure”. And if we measure that with the wrong standard, if we get sidetracked from what we have set out to accomplish, then we have completely lost the whole picture. Then we will produce a “tomato” that is strong and shiny, but tastes horrible.

Jesus was always reminding His disciples of this. In Luke 10 we read the account of Jesus sending out 70 disciples into the towns to cure the sick and share the Good News of Jesus Christ with everyone. Verse 17 says that they “returned with joy, saying, ‘Lord, even the demons submit to us!’” They found success. They were doing some pretty powerful things in Jesus’ name. So what is Jesus’ response?

“Yes, God has given all this to you, and more. But don’t rejoice because the spirits submit to you,” Jesus said. “Rejoice that your names are written in heaven.”

Yes, it is good what you are doing. God has given you great power. Excellent. But never lose sight of the big picture—that God wants you and all people with Him in heaven. This is about God’s glory and His love for all of us. Stay focused on that alone. That is where true success lies.

**Jesus gives us the “why” for all that we do as His disciples we heard as He prayed: That the world may know that God sent Jesus for them and that He loves them.**

Yes, we are to go and make disciples. But that begins by a person coming to know God’s love for him.

When we talk about all that we do as a church, let’s be sure we can end every sentence with “so the world may know that God sent Jesus and that He loves them.”

We continue to strengthen worship...so that the world may know that God sent Jesus and that He loves them. We give generously to the church...so that the world may know that God sent Jesus and that He loves them. We repair the church roof...so that the world may know that God sent Jesus and that He loves them.

That is the standard, the guideline, by which we measure our success in all that we do as Christ’s Church. That begins to put everything in a different light. If our measure of success is that the world may know that God sent Jesus and that He loves them, and that is the *only* way we measure ourselves, suddenly all we do takes on a new perspective. Success is redefined.

**We must always remember what God has told us, that His ways are not like our ways.**

Jesus said, “I do not give to you as the world gives.” What we may call a success can potentially be a complete failure. What we may deem a failure God can use to accomplish His will.

Let’s take a look at the Apostle Paul, the man of many “successful failures”. Paul wanted to do nothing other than tell others about Jesus Christ, so that they would know that God sent Jesus and know He loves them. Well, sure enough Paul ends up in prison for doing just that. But while he is there he writes some letters to the other believers on the outside. One of the letters is to the Philippians. You might think that naturally Paul

would write something like, “Well everyone, it was great while it lasted, but it looks like the Roman authorities finally won. So much for that dream.”

No, quite the contrary. Paul remembers his one and only mission in life and gives them a word of assurance. They were worried about Paul, but he immediately puts things into perspective. Listen to his words, here from Philippians 1:12-14, “*I want you to know, beloved, that what has happened to me has actually helped to spread the Gospel, so that it has become known throughout the whole imperial guard and to everyone else that my imprisonment is for Christ; and most of the brothers and sisters, having been made confident in the Lord by my imprisonment, dare to speak the Word with greater boldness and without fear.*”

“What has happened to me has actually helped to spread the Gospel.” Paul was pleased because God continued to give him success, even from prison. The guards watching over Paul were wondering who this guy was, so Paul told them all about why he was imprisoned—for the sake of Jesus. From his chains Paul shared the love of God. It was *because* of Paul’s imprisonment that more and more people were talking about Jesus.

And what is more, because of what God was doing through Paul’s situation, the other disciples grew deeper in their faith and more equipped to do the work of Christ.

Some would think that Paul’s mission ended in failure, locked up in chains. If so, then that constitutes a very successful failure. Paul stayed focused on what was important, that the Gospel was being spread, that God was being glorified. He never forgot or lost sight of why he was doing what he was doing, that the world would know that God sent Jesus and that He loves them. Paul knew that:

**The means to accomplish God’s will is up to God.**

In her book *Walking on Water*, Madeleine L’Engle writes: “One time I was talking to my spiritual director, and I was deeply grieved about something, and I kept telling him how woefully I had failed someone I love, failed totally; otherwise that person couldn’t have done the wrong that was so destructive. Finally, he looked at me and said calmly, ‘Who are you to think you are better than our Lord? After all, he was singularly ‘unsuccessful’ with a great many people.’”

L’Engle says, “That remark, made to me many years ago, has stood me in great stead, time and again. I have to try, but...following Christ has nothing to do with success as the world sees success. It has to do with love.”

Yes. The greatest success by God was deemed an utter failure by the world—when Jesus died on the Cross for you and me out of pure love.

One of you shared with me recently, “When we give of ourselves in worship, when we give time and resources, we share this merciful love with the world. We witness that there is such a magnificent, powerful, complete love in a world full of hatred and mercilessness. We love because He first loved us.” Yes, that is what the world so desperately needs. That is what should drive every thought, decision, expenditure, everything we do. Will this help someone know that God sent Jesus and that He loves them?

Because any “success” we have is meaningless unless it truly serves this purpose of God.

In *Actions Speak Louder Than Words*, Herb Miller writes: “Two Kentucky farmers who owned racing stables had developed a keen rivalry. One spring each of

them entered a horse in a local steeplechase. Thinking that a professional rider might help him outdo his friend, one of the farmers engaged a crack jockey. The two horses were neck and neck with a large lead over the rest of the pack at the last fence, but suddenly both fell, unseating their riders.

“The professional jockey remounted quickly and rode on to win the race. Returning triumphantly to the paddock, the jockey found the farmer who had hired him fuming with rage.

“‘What’s the matter?’ the jockey asked. ‘I won, didn’t I?’

“‘Oh, yea,’ roared the farmer. ‘You won all right, but you crossed the finish line on the wrong horse.’

“In his hurry to remount after the fall, the jockey had jumped on his competitor’s horse.”

“Success” is meaningless unless we are on the right horse.

So what horse are you riding, are we riding here at Oakland? Are we, like the tomato growers in California, producing a strong and shiny tomato with no taste? What kind of fruit do we bear?

May we always measure our success according to God’s will, that the world may know God sent Jesus and that He loves them. God will provide the means to get there. Amen.