

QUEST FOR SUCCESS

Last Sunday at the church picnic, after I finished eating, I wadded my garbage into a ball and eyed the garbage can.... some 50 feet away. Okay, maybe it was 15 feet.

I looked at Daniel and asked, "Do you want to see who can be first make it in?" Enduring some "trash talk", I carefully calculated the wind and lofted my makeshift basketball..... If there was a net, it would have gone "Swoosh". It was dead centre.

With a satisfied grin, I looked at Daniel and said, "Your turn."

Daniel looked at Katherine and asked, "Is your dad competitive?"

Katherine.....laughed, rolled her eyes and embarrassingly said, "Yes".

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Okay,.....I admit it. I am a bit.... just a bit.... competitive, but I think that's fine.

Healthy, respectful competition can be fun and invigorating.

In fact, I think it is noble and admirable to strive to do our best / to fully apply ourselves. The pursuit of excellence is good,....to a point.

Sometimes the drive to excel is not so pure. Sometimes the motivation to win can take us down a dark, unhealthy and destructive path.

The desire to do our best can be over shadowed by an impetus / a need / a drive.... to satisfy something deeper within us.

A focussed desire to do well is fine, as is respectful competition; however.... the goals, the purpose, the consequences and our motivation should be measured with clear thought.

And, our self-analysis should be in the context of being followers of Christ / servants for God. When our Quest for success is destructive to others and takes us away from God, then we truly are on a dangerous path.

Our hunger / our drive must be understood.....or it will control us, and eventually be all consuming.

And, that is living in bondage.

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Even in small matters, we should be aware of what we hunger after / what is our motivation..... because if we are not aware, then we can easily become the victim of our own drive and lust.

We must clearly understand our definition for "success."

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Does success mean doing our best.....or...is it unconnected to the activity. Meaning: does it involve conquest and the need to fill a personal emptiness?

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The quest for an *unconnected success* can blind us to reality, turn others into paving stones.... and take us to arenas that are dangerous, destructive and filled with regret.

This pattern can be seen in the sports domain.....where winning usually means more than athletic achievement.

Doping and cheating come into play, and are ubiquitous in some sports, because money and domination are in the success formula.

Rude and screaming parents watching their child's participation in sport are declaring there is more at stake than having fun and personal improvement.

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Sports, with its straight forward rules, was supposed to be for fun, physical and social recreation. For example, Basketball was invented to provide exercise and recreation. Therefore, a successful game or season would be when the players "exerted" themselves in good discipline, fairness and fun – correct?

.... I think the NBA has taken it a bit farther than that.....

This criticism would apply to most any major sport.... and ... to our culture as a whole.

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Too often, Success has come to mean domination and conquest, and **not** just doing well in the context of the activity.

For some people, getting through the day or simply coming to church is a brave success story, but those "honest" stories are buried under our culture's fascination with conquest and social supremacy.

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Our culture's distorted vision of success drives people to overwork themselves, sacrificing their families and their souls,... and.. leaves most with an unnecessary and devastating sense of failure and unfulfilled hunger.

Things get ugly and un-Godly when success includes conquest, domination and the pursuit of power. That definition is the law of the jungle, and that drive tramples on love and grace.

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Sadly, this is very evident in our political domain--a domain that is supposed to be a democracy.

Attack ads to devalue / disgrace an opponent are disgraceful. And shockingly, we have come to accept this as "normal".

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Not long ago, I responded to a survey, and one question was, "Which candidate do you think is the strongest leader?"

I couldn't answer that question.....because I don't want a strong leader! I want a compassionate Prime Minister who seeks good counsel, respects diversity, is just and gracious, and listens to the weakest.

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Moreover, don't think this distorted / disconnected view of success is only for the elite and powerful.

Anytime we declare that **my view** of religion / **my interpretation** of God's will or the Bible is the correct and only way for everyone, then we are treading down the path of domination and conquest. The Quest for Success should never demand conformity or submission to one's perception or opinions.

When the quest for success includes domination and destruction, then it is really failure and not the way of God that Christ lived.

From Second Samuel we learn about Absalom and Joab; two men who valued success and glory.

Joab was King David's general of the army – the powerful “Enforcer”.

Absalom was a son of King David. David had a number of children, as was the custom with Kings.

Absalom was a very handsome man. It is said that he had long beautiful hair, that he only trimmed once a year.

No doubt, he was a capable, proud and illustrious person. He was very different from his eldest brother, Amnon.

Amnon, was a deprived character. He lusted after his own sister, Tamar, and one day tricked her into being alone with him, and he raped her. Amnon Raped his own sister.

Absalom found out about what his brother did and was furious,.... and became even more enraged because his father, King David, was slow to severely punish Amnon.

His sympathy for his sister combined with his intense anger and arrogance moved Absalom to travel down the destructive road of Redemptive violence. He became a righteous crusader.

He generously took his desecrated sister into his house, to care for her, AND then, ignoring the will of his father, set out for Vengeance.

On his own, he set a trap and killed his brother Amnon.

It was an act of vengeance, NOT justice. Justice is never murder. Justice never includes taking a life to replace a life.

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David was very much sadden by what happened, and initially ostracized Absalom, but later, did seek to forgive Absalom.

At that point, It didn't matter. Absalom was travelling down a different path. Momentum was starting to form. He was on the “righteous crusader High road”, and his goal was to purge immorality from all of Israel, ... including his father the King.

Domination and conquest painted over with religious morality is ugly and evil.

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Success became a passion for him, an impersonal passion. His principles were more important than people.

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Strange... how zealous crusaders carry the banner of God's love and righteousness, yet March to the anthem of fear and hate. They are not in tune with God's love.

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Absalom was charismatic and he made bold promises! Plus, he was good looking. *It is easier to be popular if you're good looking.*

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Absalom persuaded many tribes of Israel to follow him, and the people were awed by his quest for success.

He formed an army, and threatened to remove David from the throne and become King. In Absalom's own eyes, he would be a better and more Just King than David. He would demand empirical / measurable righteousness,..... and to him .... that would be success – forced purity.... ..as he defined it.

NOWHERE in the Bible does it mention that he sought God's advice or reconciliation.

Absalom already knew what was righteous, so he thought.

Subsequently, he prepared for battle – events were unfolding, momentum was happening.

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David was a capable and ambitious person, too. He had his own momentum – he wanted to stay in power. He believed He was right and that his son was an enemy,.....and David was powerful, too. David had spies, and so he knew Absalom's every move,....AND... David had an experienced army,...which included the very aggressive General Joab!

Joab enjoyed his successful station in life. He had a powerful position, and so he was a strong defender for David. He had to be – it meant retention of his “successful” job.

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David called his generals, and told them of his plan to counter Absalom's threat and end the nation's division.

It appears that David was not seeking revenge or destruction, but instead wanted unity, YET his momentum and his tools included brute force.

David's plan was to split his army in 3 parts and force Absalom's inexperienced army into a densely forested area where they would become disoriented, confused,... and then panic and flee. David hoped this would minimize casualties.

Yet, playing with fire can result in an inferno, .... and military peacekeepers only exist under the threat of war.

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David had a wise plan. David wanted to end the threat, and Not all the lives of his adversaries,..... but a violent collision was about to happen.

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As we know, the focus of the military is to win battles. The military includes combat victories as success. Avoiding or ending hostilities rarely are the sole understanding of military success. Once unleashed, the dogs of war do their destruction.

That being the case, soldiers are usually forced into terrible predicaments – the vortex of conflicting momentums that render killing as the only way out. Killing and destruction become the consequences ... and the goal to end the consequences.

That is where it gets ugly.

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David's generals realized they had a good plan, and could see a Powerful, total victory could be had,.... so they slyly advised King David to stay at home, telling him, “The King should not take a risk.”

They were less concerned about his wellbeing, than they were about his presence restraining them from complete battlefield success.

David agreed to stay behind– which was unusual for a king, in those days. I think it is prudent for Kings and politicians to be in the middle of the battles they force others to execute.

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Before the military set out, David explicitly ordered his generals, and I quote, “Deal gently, for my sake, with the young man Absalom.”

And the Scriptures state, “Everyone heard the king’s orders.”

Even though Absalom was an usurper, he was still David’s son, and David did NOT want to lose another son.

He wanted to be a FATHER First, and a national leader second, yet decisions with a destructive trajectory were made.

It is presumptuous and arrogant to believe the axiom, "Speak softly, but carry a big stick."

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David’s strategy worked well. The thick woods confused the inexperienced army. Yet, David’s generals pursued **Their** goal of victory, in spite of David’s will,... and their strategy became the framework for slaughter. Many, many thousands were killed by Joab and his troops. And, in their eyes, they were successful, but they were in their own domain – Not in David’s will.

They were following their definition of what success meant, not David’s.

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During the chaos of the forest battle, Absalom was riding his horse in the dense woods. He tried to avoid a bramble / briar patch, but his hair became entangled in the thicket, pulling him off his horse and leaving him hanging there to be found.

:) A little Biblical Poetic justice about excessive hair!!!  
So you see, it's good to be bald.

Back to the narrative:

Soldiers of Joab rushed in, recognized that it was Absalom, and they remembered David’s explicit orders to NOT harm Absalom. So, they did not.

They quickly reported their find to Joab, and Joab came to the scene of Absalom dangling by his hair.

*It is very difficult, in battle, to clearly discern / to restrain... when the momentum toward success includes destruction. Generals like to, so to speak, remove the head of the opposition,..... before theirs are removed.*

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So,..... the brave and mighty Joab looked into Absalom’s eyes with a cold mechanical stare, and he did NOT see David’s son, he did NOT see a fellow human with the potential for love and compassion, but rather, with is clouded vision, he saw an object, a criminal, a “bad guy” who was a threat to Joab’s own security and success.

Joab, defying David’s orders, thrust 3 spears into Absalom, and then commanded 10 of his troops to finish the job.... so that the blood of guilt would be on many, and NO ... “ONE” person could be blamed – sly.

Think about it, what crimes are done collectively, even by governments, in order to defuse the blame????

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Fascinating how that happens. The Leader and political party put their names on tax reductions or other benefits, Yet when they send citizens to war (to kill and be killed), it's done in the name of Canada so that we all will share the blame. ???

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Absalom was killed, and when David found out he wept and cried out for his lost son. Absalom's quest sent him down a dangerous path and got him in trouble. Joab's drive killed him, and DAVID ...LOST another son. A son was needlessly killed..... because of the great quest.....

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What is so appealing about winning?  
What is the irresistible lure to be better than others--to dominate?  
What is so satisfying about being number one?  
What motivates people to sacrifice themselves for the sake of what others call success?  
What drives leaders to send sons and daughter off to kill sons and daughters? ??????????  
What is that hunger? And, what can truly satisfy that hunger?

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Michael Jackson was at the top of his world, and he was not content; he was not satisfied. What was he looking for?
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Could it be they, WE... just want to be loved and accepted?
Could it be that the great quest for success is simply to be loved, valued and appreciated?
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Michael Jackson's inner child was deeply wounded. Hurtful relationships with parents is common among "driven" people,.. who often become leaders, such as Absalom, Hitler and countless others. Examining the background of recent, US leaders, we'll discover a broken relationship with a parent. And, it's usually with the father.... I don't know why that is?

President Obama never knew his father. George W. Bush disappointed his father, most of his life. Clinton's father left him at a young age. Reagan was estranged from his father and so on.

I think wars have been caused because a leader needed to prove something....needed to fill a personal void..... So terribly sad.

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There was another son, the son of God.

Before he accomplished anything; before he even began his ministry, HIS heavenly father said to him, "SON, I love you and with you I am well pleased."
There is a lesson there: parents..... tell and show your love, and don't stop demonstrating the love, regardless of your or their age.
Tell your children that you are proud of them, and don't tie it to some achievement,.... and Don't make it conditional.

Telling a gay son or lesbian daughter, "I love you, but I think it's wrong for you to get married" is really saying, "I love the image I have for you, and I love my values." That message is not loving a son or daughter, nor is it gracious.

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In addition, let us learn from Jesus' life example.

Jesus did not appease the rich and powerful. He didn't take their money and he was Not indebted to them.

Jesus did NOT maneuver into social or political status and success.

He did NOT have fancy TV commercials to boast his image. In fact, Jesus only had a few frumpy and dishevelled followers.

He went about helping others and proclaiming justice, peace and grace as the way to atonement with God.

Jesus was NOT the model of how popular culture defines success, YET.... He was the bread of life that satisfies our deepest hunger – which is to be loved and filled with love.

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Perhaps the answer is NOT in the quest, but in the surrender to our gracious and loving God?