

WHAT WE COUNT...

Philippians 3: 1-14

[Augsburg College Chapel, 18 April 2011, Monday in Holy Week]

I live in a world of metrics.

Each and every day, I must think about budget bottom-lines and fundraising goals and enrollment targets and retention rates and endowment values. I am judged in my work primarily by how well I do – indeed, how well we do – in meeting those various metrics. What counts is making our numbers.

How about you? For our students, it's about GPAs and test scores. For our faculty, it's about student evaluations and published research. For our staff, it's about departmental goals and budgets.

And when we step away from our work, it doesn't change much. We are judged by our income level, our credit scores, our batting average, our IQ scores, our awards and recognitions.

We all know the drill. In the world, success is a commodity – measured, benchmarked and scored. And we live in the world.

And so did Jesus. So it is no great surprise that in our Palm and Passion Sunday liturgies yesterday, many of us reenacted the triumphant entry Jesus made into Jerusalem. Cheered by adoring throngs, lauded with palm branches, greeted as the one who would be our king – measured by the world's standards for success and *climbing* the career ladder.

But we, of course, know the end of this story. And as we read the passion narrative yesterday, we were reminded once again that Jesus did not live up to the world's metrics and that the world pushed back with the ultimate punishment for failing to meet its goals. What we count is not what God intends.

The Apostle Paul knew this tension between the world's metrics and God's plans firsthand. As he writes to the faithful at Philippi: "I have every reason to be confident in the world's ways – I've done what the law requires, I am righteous, I am a success." And yet, as Paul so eloquently confesses, "...whatever gains I had, these I have come to regard as loss because of Christ." Paul has seen that what the world counts as success and righteousness – meeting our goals, following the rules – is rubbish. Instead, as he proclaims, "I want to know Christ and the power of his resurrection and the sharing of his sufferings by becoming like him in his death." I want to know Christ. This, I believe, is what truly counts.

I have been reading the work of Trappist monk and social activist, Thomas Merton, this Lenten season. These powerful words are helpful to me as we turn our faces to Jerusalem during this Holy Week and consider how we, too, might live as Paul instructs the Philippians – as those who count as God’s faithful people....

*Do not depend on the hope of results....
you may have to face the fact that your work
will be apparently worthless and even achieve
no result at all, if not perhaps results opposite
to what you expect. As you get used to this idea,
you start more and more to concentrate not on the
results, but on the value, the rightness,
the truth of the work itself....
gradually you struggle less and less
for an idea and more and more for specific people....
In the end, it is the reality of personal relationships
that saves everything.*

“I want to know Christ,” Paul confesses. Here is the personal relationship that gives our lives meaning and purpose, that redeems us from the world’s ways. Here is what counts. And when we stand six days from now with the women who first came to the tomb, we will come face to face with the Risen One, and we will know through faith that all has been accomplished, and that we have been freed to live as those who know Christ and who share in God’s loving intentions for all of creation.

Now, I am no Apostle (though I am proud to bear Paul’s name!) and I am no Thomas Merton, and all of this is well and good, and I do believe – but I also live in the world, in the world where what counts is, in fact, results and metrics. How do I make sense of this tension in my daily life? How do I balance what the world demands with what God requires of me? Lord, I believe, help my unbelief.

As we enter these holy days, allow me to suggest that God calls us not to seek balance – as if that would help us live in the tension. Instead, we are called to a way of being that is, in fact, out of balance, leaving us to rely on the pull of a divine force and power that draws us in, that centers us – rather than the false assumption that we can find that fulcrum of balance within ourselves. This is the centered life, as our Augsburg colleague Jack Fortin teaches us. Balance is our human longing, the world’s metrics – surely if we get our lives in balance, all will work out, all will be well. We’ve all been there in this eternal quest for balance in our lives – it’s wrapped up in the metrics and standards imposed by and on us. But these attempts at balance distract us from what God calls us to be and do. Balance is the wrong metaphor for the life of faith (not to mention it is impossible to achieve) – instead, the center holds us in God’s orbit...and centered in God, we suspend our efforts to make everything work out, to pursue what we believe we deserve, to rely on the opinions of others to measure our worth in the world, to count as the world would have us count. Centered in God, we know what really counts as we

live into what God intends for us to do as partners in the work of resurrection and of making new things happen.

In Dr. Fortin's lovely book entitled *The Centered Life* (which I highly recommend), he illustrates through many compelling stories how what counts in the world distracts us from what truly gives our lives meaning and purpose. He urges us:

- To be awakened to what God is doing in our lives and how our futile efforts to live up to the world's metrics distract and exhaust us. I have been awakened this Lent by Thomas Merton to what really counts.
- To be called to what God intends for us to do as faithful people witnessing in all we do to what God intends for all of creation.
- To be freed from the world's demands, knowing that in Christ we have the gift of the freedom for our neighbor, and
- To be nurtured in communities of faith and memory and practice so that together we might find the strength and courage and abundance to stay centered even when it is so easy to give into the world's measures of what counts.

This call to a centered life is not some naïve claim that we can escape the tensions of our lives in the world, but it is a bold invitation to know Christ and the power of the resurrection. We can live in the tensions between what counts in the world and what God requires, and yet not be defined by those tensions. We have a center – now we must learn to live as if that were true.

What does it look like to live a centered life?

[Will Campbell story of “vocation and grace.” The center is not in the applause of the adoring throngs. The center is in the personal relationships. Who needs us to be here and to offer our gifts for the good of the cosmos? It may seem rather mundane, but this is a centered life.]

I live in the world of metrics and yet I know that the Risen Christ is my center, my rock, my stronghold, my salvation. Blessings during these holy days ahead and thanks be to our awesome God. Amen.