

Building a cathedral
Deuteronomy 34:1-12, Pentecost 19, Year A
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Peter Drucker would have loved Moses. Drucker, the 20th century's premier management guru who mentored the likes of GE's Jack Welch and Intel's Andy Grove, could spot successful leaders a mile away. He'd surely have spotted Moses.

Moses fit the bill of the effective leader in almost in every way. He proved to be a problem-solver extraordinaire on multiple occasions. When the enemy gave chase and all seemed helpless, he parted the Red Sea. He drew water from a rock to slake the people's thirst. When starvation threatened, he procured both manna and quail from heaven.

Moses was also a profoundly effective, high stakes negotiator. He tells the Israelites upon coming down from Mount Sinai, "I lay prostrate before the Lord when the Lord intended to destroy you. I prayed to the Lord and said, 'Lord God, don't destroy the people who are your own possession...whom you brought out of Egypt with a mighty hand...pay no attention to their wickedness and sin.'"

And the Lord relented. Moses "won" his negotiation with *God*. Now, *that's* impressive.

Finally, Moses was the quintessential charismatic leader. He convinced an entire Israelite workforce in Egypt to leave their jobs and their homes and join his start-up, so to speak. He led the Israelites for forty years in the wilderness, and he effectively navigated several threatened strikes and work stoppages. And through it all, he was loved. Forget Peter Drucker. If you want to read a fantastic book on leadership success, pick up Exodus!

But wait a minute...We may have to rethink Moses. You see, Moses never completed the job. He didn't seal the deal. As we learn in Deuteronomy this morning, after forty years of leading the Israelites, Moses died without taking those final few steps into the Promised Land. Maybe, then, Moses is at best a tragic case, one who had all the promise and showed all the skills but couldn't see things to their final completion, one who had a vision but failed to realize it.

So was Moses a failure? This question turns, I think, on our cultural assumptions about what success looks like.

In recent years sociologists have written about how we as individuals have come to prefer pursuits in which the time span from start to finish is circumscribed and relatively brief, in which the pay-off is tangible, and in which the recognition for success is personal. Another way of saying this is that we put our hearts and souls into pursuits that we can *win* in some way; and then we find our fulfillment in these personal victories. For those of us with kids today, we take

this even a step further, and we push our kids to engage in these same kinds of pursuits in the hopes that their successes reflect on us as much as on them.

In terms of the narrative of our lives, we each one of us imagine that we are the main character in a story, around which everything and everyone else revolves.

But Moses offers an entirely different model of success. Moses never sought, either consciously or unconsciously, to be the center of the story. What's more, Moses became aware early on that he would never enter the Promised Land. God told him so. It was not a surprise. He knew that he would have to pass the mantle to Joshua and hope that Joshua could become a leader in his own right. And yet, with full knowledge that he would not see the project through, that the fruits of his labor would ripen beyond his lifetime, that the recognition for success would not be his, Moses continued to negotiate, to problem-solve, to lead, and to love the people Israel.

How could Moses follow this path that was so lacking in all our markers of success and fulfillment? The difference is that the vision Moses pursued, the vision to which he gave himself fully, was not his own. It did not find its source in him, and he did not seek to find himself in its center. Moses understood that the world around him was not *his* drama, with God cast as a supporting character. Rather, he located his life *in God's drama*. Moses grasped that leadership, success, and faithfulness meant that he must seek to discover and live out a supporting role in *God's* story for the world. Moses found his meaning in *God's* vision.

This is a drastically different model of success. What would the different perspective be in our choice of pursuits, in the way we find our meaning?

There is an old parable about the building of a grand, gothic cathedral in medieval England. Construction began years before, and every worker on the site will be dead long before the church is completed. No one present will see the end. A traveler comes upon the half-finished edifice and leaves the road to explore it. He pauses to ask a stonecutter what he is doing. Over the clink of his hammer and chisel, the man replies, "I'm carving a gargoyle's wing.

The traveler continues a few steps to see a man stirring thick paste in a bucket. "What are you doing?" he asks. The workman replies, "I'm mixing mortar."

Finally, as the traveler is about to leave the half-finished site, he sees an old, bent woman slowly and deliberately sweeping away dust and clutter with her broom. "And you, mother, what are you doing?" the traveler asks.

The woman looks up at him and beams through her wrinkled face. "Sir," she says, "I'm building a cathedral."

There are those who find their identity, their meaning, their success in the next quarterly statement, the next report card, the next invitation, or the next project that brings personal acclamation and success. And then there are those who find their meaning in something that began long before them and will extend far beyond their personal vision and, indeed, their very lives. There are those who, with the setting of a stone or the sweep of a broom—with the teaching of children, the healing of the infirm, the balancing of books, the making of a home... whatever it may be—there are those who *build cathedrals*.

God grants Moses the privilege to climb Mount Nebo and look out upon the land that will, someday, be Israel. Though it doesn't exist yet, Moses can see in his mind's eye where the lands of Dan and Ephraim and Judah will be. He can see, in the anticipation of his heart, where the milk and honey will flow.

Of all his leadership, of all his power and success, the greatest thing about Moses is his willingness to shepherd the people Israel to a land he will never enter. And in that—in God's great story—Moses finds his meaning. He has participated in God's vision. He has played his part.

Where do we find our meaning? Where do we find success in our lives? Last week, Philip Yancey encouraged us to pray not by asking God to do things for us, to shore up our personal successes, but rather by asking God what he would have us do for his world each day. I like that. I pray we seek to discover our role in God's grand story. It is a story whose ending we may glimpse in daily moments of grace, hope and beauty, like Moses looking out from Mount Nebo. And though we are unlikely in this life fully to see its completion, it is a story for whose plot we are nevertheless, each one of us, essential. I pray we will, each in our own lives, measure our success by putting stone upon stone to build cathedrals.

Amen.