

4th Sunday after Epiphany
February 2, 2025
Lincoln Heights Lutheran Church
Popularity is not Proof of Success

2 Timothy 3:14-4:5 (EHV)

As for you, continue in the things you have learned and about which you have become convinced. You know from whom you learned them ¹⁵and that from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus. ¹⁶All Scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that the man of God may be complete, well equipped for every good work.

I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and Christ Jesus, who is going to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom: ²Preach the word. Be ready whether it is convenient or not. Correct, rebuke, and encourage, with all patience and teaching. ³For there will come a time when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, because they have itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in line with their own desires. ⁴They will also turn their ears away from the truth and will turn aside to myths.

⁵As for you, keep a clear head in every situation. Bear hardship. Do the work of an evangelist. Fulfill your ministry.

Dear Friends in Christ,

In 2024, this congregation set some records. We recorded the highest average attendance for Sunday worship in the history of the congregation. We also had the most people attend a Christmas Day service and a Thanksgiving service. As far as I can tell, we also had the highest average Sunday School attendance too. And the financial blessings of the congregation have never been this abundant. So, was it a successful year? Are we a successful congregation?

The numbers may tell us a little about a congregation, but numbers alone really only tell us about popularity, not success in the eyes of God. If you put all 1,200 or so congregations of our Wisconsin Evangelical Lutheran Synod together, the numbers would tell you that the Roman Catholic Church was way more successful than we were. The numbers would tell you that the Muslims had far more people attend their worship on a weekly basis than in the WELS. And the most successful of all was probably the National Football League with hundreds of thousands in the stadiums every Sunday and millions more watching live on a screen and billions of dollars to show for it. Popularity may be an indicator of success in the world. But our epiphany moment today is the opposite. Popularity is not Proof of Success.

The apostle Paul was a successful missionary. In the letter before us this morning, he is writing to a new pastor named Timothy to encourage him. In the verses before our verses, Paul is not very encouraging. He tells Timothy that it is going to get really bad in the days before Jesus returns. Sin will seem to be out of control as people only serve their sinful natures. Paul warns that his life is an example of what Timothy should expect. Paul was persecuted and chased from town to town when he preached the gospel. Timothy should not expect to be popular or for his congregations to be popular in the world. Persecution instead, should be expected. How then, can we measure success as a believer, as a pastor, as a congregation?

Paul points Timothy to the Word of God – the Word that brought Timothy to faith, the Word that equips a believer for life, the Word that believers proclaim faithfully.

As for you, continue in the things you have learned and about which you have become convinced. You know from whom you learned them ¹⁵and that from infancy you have known the Holy Scriptures, which are able to make you wise for salvation through faith in Christ Jesus.

Timothy received the gift of salvation through faith in God's promises through the Holy Scriptures. His mother and grandmother taught him the Word of God, the Old Testament at that time, and God brought Timothy to believe the promises of a Savior to come. When Timothy heard from Paul that Jesus is the Christ, the Son of God, who lived and died and rose for him, Timothy believed. God had already given him faith and now he knew his Savior's name. It was all through the Word of God. How can the Word of God give faith to a very young child or to anyone of any age? Because of what Paul writes next:

¹⁶All Scripture is God breathed...

The Bible is not just another human book. The Bible is not a collection of essays written by men with their thoughts about God. The Bible is not a how to book for good, moral living, with advice from great teachers in history. The Bible is God breathed. In the beginning God breathed into man the breath of life and the man became a living being. God's breath gave life to the dust of the earth and we humans are now living beings. God's breath is powerful.

Since all Scripture is God breathed, all Scripture is also powerful and capable of giving life, spiritual life. Since all Scripture is God breathed, all Scripture is true, for God does not lie. God breathed into the authors the very thoughts and words to write. The style may be that of Moses, Isaiah, Matthew and Paul, but the words are God's words. Since the words are God's words, the Word is powerful to give faith and strengthen faith. God's Word is successful as God tells us through the prophet Isaiah:

My word that goes out from my mouth will not return to me empty. Rather, it will accomplish whatever I please, and it will succeed in the purpose for which I sent it. (Is 55:11)

Therefore, we do not measure success as a believer, as a pastor or as a congregation by popularity or numbers. Success is measured according to God's Word. Success is using God's Word faithfully.

¹⁶All Scripture is God breathed and is useful for teaching, for rebuking, for correcting, and for training in righteousness, ¹⁷so that the man of God may be complete, well equipped for every good work.

I solemnly charge you in the presence of God and Christ Jesus, who is going to judge the living and the dead, and in view of his appearing and his kingdom: ²Preach the word. Be ready whether it is convenient or not. Correct, rebuke, and encourage, with all patience and teaching. ³For there will come a time when people will not put up with sound doctrine. Instead, because they have itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers in line with their own desires. ⁴They will also turn their ears away from the truth and will turn aside to myths.

God promises that his powerful Word that he breathed out onto the pages of Scripture does amazing things. Not only did the Word bring us from unbelief to faith in Christ, but it also equips a believer for a life of good works. It also trains us in righteousness. It corrects and encourages us. It keeps us in the one, true faith until eternal life.

But that doesn't always itch the ears of everyone. Many find the NFL much more interesting than the Scriptures. Even after next Sunday, there will likely be more hours spent talking about the NFL in the offseason than spent in God's Word for many in our nation. We also can get pulled from God's Word by what is interesting to us. Other books, video games, movies, friends, work, hobbies, and more compete for our interest over God's Word and too often win.

People may also be looking for what is practical and get the idea that the Scriptures are not practical. Politics is practical because government policies affect our lives, sometimes directly and immediately. Therefore, many hours are spent reading about politics, watching people talk about politics, discussing politics with others. And our sinful nature convinces us that Scripture isn't practical for this time in our lives. It was good when we were young, so we learned about

Jesus and right and wrong. It might be good when I get old and am ready for heaven. But there are other more important and practical things to spend time on now. Scripture can wait.

Oh, how quickly we can turn aside from Scripture so we can do what we want to do and hear what our itching ears want to hear. God knows what we need to hear whether we know it or not. We need to hear the words he breathed into the holy Scriptures. We need to hear sound doctrine. We need to hear his call to repent. We need to hear where we have gone astray. And we need to hear the good news that the One who is going to judge the living and the dead has paid for the sin of the world. The Savior in whom Timothy was brought to believe in for his salvation, has died to save me too. The Christ, who was laid in the tomb on Friday rose from the dead on Sunday, guaranteeing the payment for sin was accepted by his Father in heaven. May we never tire of hearing the encouragement in God's Word that Christ has saved us.

I don't get to attend Sunday School classes very often, but I do realize that some class times go more according to plan than others. Sometimes the children are on task and sometimes not. Sometimes there are lots of children and sometimes one or two. What makes it a successful Sunday School class? Jesus and his Word. If one child heard about Jesus that morning, it was a successful day because God works through the gospel. The same is true for our personal lives and our congregation. Success is when the Word of God is proclaimed and heard, read and studied, believed and trusted. For the holy Scriptures make one wise for salvation through faith in Christ. There is no greater success than receiving eternal life through faith in Christ.

Amen.