

March 4, 2018  
Mark 8:31-38  
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### **“Winners and Losers”**

Good morning. This has been a week to do some soul-searching for me, there have been several contributing factors, including being intentional about the Lent practices of prayer and solitude, and studying this passage from Mark 8. Sometimes taking your own advice can be tricky thing. I'm not suggesting that soul-searching is a *bad* thing, but at least for me it is kind of like spring house-cleaning: I know it's a good thing to do, but start reluctantly because there are things in the closet that should have gotten rid of a long time ago, and some dirt that I wouldn't want everyone to see.

If we find ourselves a little reluctant to engage with the idea of sacrifice and the cross, we're probably not alone. This passage from Mark 8 is a difficult one, for sure. We ought to be unsettled by these words of Jesus, “If any wants to become my followers let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for the sake of the gospel will save it.” Have you heard something like that before? Jesus is quoted as saying almost exactly the same words in Matthew 16 and Luke 9: this is not just some one-off idea that Mark put into his gospel; the concept of losing our lives for the sake of the gospel is at the heart of Christianity. It was the guiding principle of Jesus' life, it was the manner of his death, it is what we are told we have to do in order to become Jesus' followers. There are no shortcuts around the cross. It can be difficult to consider what it means in our own lives, let alone try to explain it to someone else.

J. Philip Newell is a contemporary voice of Celtic Christianity and theology. In the book “Christ of the Celts,” he shares a story about a woman who had inherited some jewelry from her mother. Among the pieces she inherited was a cross, and she didn't know what to do with

**it: the teachings she had received about Christ and the cross were bewildering, and didn't seem to relate to her deepest experiences of life and relationships. On the other hand, she didn't want to lose the cross or give it away. In fact, something about the cross was so precious to her that she kept it under a floorboard in her house for safe keeping. Newell suggests that the cross is a precious part of the church's inheritance, but many of us are uncomfortable or confused about what it means. What are we to do with the cross?**

**It is clear that in the gospel of Mark, as well as the corollary texts in Matthew and Luke, that Jesus is trying to prepare his disciples for his physical death -- and prepare them with the knowledge that it will be a violent death, accompanied by suffering and rejection. The disciples, of course, don't want to hear this. When Peter pulls Jesus aside to tell Jesus to back off a bit, Jesus rebukes Peter in the strongest possible terms, implying that it is Satan speaking through Peter. And then Jesus addresses his disciples and the gathered crowd to tell them that in order to find their lives they will have to lose their lives for Jesus' sake. I don't think Jesus is saying that every follower of his has to die a violent physical death, but some of them did, including Peter. But somehow the cross is at the heart of Jesus' ministry and at the heart of God.**

**The cross means, literally and symbolically, that we have to lose something significant in order to gain something even greater. That's the meaning of the word 'sacrifice.' In our culture -- maybe any culture -- if you want to insult someone, you call them a loser. This doesn't mean that they misplace things, it implies that they're at the back of the pack, the bottom of the ladder, the last one in the race, the dullest knife in the drawer. Slow, stupid, unattractive. Nobody wants to be a loser. It's shameful: people make fun of you and avoid you. We want to be winners! We want other people to see how successful and prosperous and beautiful we are.**

**But if we look at this passage from Mark, there are no winners here. There are only those who keep their lives for themselves and those who lose their lives for the sake of the gospel. And in the end, those who keep their lives lose everything. Non-losers and losers. And Christ is with . . . the losers. Media mogul Ted Turner said years ago, "Christianity is a religion for losers." He didn't mean it as a**

**compliment, but he was correct. He even apologized to the Christian community later, but he was still correct. Christianity is for losers. That might not be comfortable to hear, and it might not be the end of the story, but that, friends, is the message of the cross. Christianity is for losers.**

**I have mentioned before a seminary classmate of mine, Adam Tice, who has written and published original lyrics for hymns. It may not be especially lucrative, but he's very good at what he does. He wrote a hymn text called "Christ is for Losers:" I want to share part it with you. And I want to say that if the phrase Christ is for Losers makes you uncomfortable, I'm right there with you.**

**Christ is for losers, the last and the least,  
Welcoming sinner and saints to his feast,  
Turning away those who bring their own bread--  
All those who assume they don't need to be fed.**

**All of my loss I count as gain  
All of my weakness, all of my pain.  
And though I die with Christ I will rise,  
For life is in Christ, the loser's prize.**

**Christ is for losers, the homeless, the poor,  
Jobless and helpless who knock at his door.  
Christ won't admit those who bring their own key,  
Who lock up the church that Christ calls to be free.**

**Christ is for losers, the broken and ill  
Lacking insurance to cover their bill.  
Those who don't know they need healing at all  
Will pay no attention to Christ and his call.**

**Christ is for losers, the wand'ring the lost,  
Those called "illegal" for line they have crossed  
Christ unites people divided by hate  
And crosses the borders earth's powers create.  
(Adam Tice C 2009, GIA Publications, Inc.)**

**The reason Christ calls us to be losers, is that only those who know they are lost can be found. Only people who know they are drowning can be saved. Only those who have lost enough of their pride to be unashamed of the gospel and unashamed of Christ will gain eternal life. This is why Jesus was so harsh when Peter says, “Hey Boss, you might want to back of the suffering and rejection stuff -- it isn’t going over very well with the crowd.” In other words, don’t let them think you’re a loser -- no one will want to follow you. But Jesus knows the path he will have to walk: to the cross and the most shame and suffering that anyone can experience; Jesus also knows that this is the only path to abundant life. Jesus is not ashamed to take this teaching straight at the disciples and the crowd: if you choose to follow Me, you’re going to be a loser. You’re going to have to let go of the shiny brass ring of being the best, most impressive, most respected winner you can be. Jesus knows that being the best we can be is a dead end. Literally, a dead end. We can gain the whole world and not get anything in return for our lives. Jesus needs followers who are willing to be losers, for Christ’s sake. People who acknowledge that we can’t feed ourselves or heal ourselves or save ourselves; all we can do is confess that we are hungry and sick and lost. Those losers are who Christ calls us to be. That is the meaning and the cost of the cross. It is a symbol of what Christ gave up in order to gain something immeasurably greater. The cross is precious because it reminds us what Christ gave up for us: it should also remind us what we need to sacrifice to be followers of Christ.**

**The cross is not the last chapter of the story. We’re getting closer to the end, though. If you want to hear the rest of the story, we have to get through some difficult chapters. But it’s a great story with an amazing plot twist at the end. Don’t miss the story from the other side of the cross.**