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“Winners and Losers”

Matthew 27:15-37

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Now at the festival the governor was accustomed to release a prisoner for the crowd, anyone whom they wanted. At that time, they had a notorious prisoner called Jesus Barabbas.

So, after they had gathered, Pilate said to them, "Whom do you want me to release for you, Jesus Barabbas or Jesus who is called the Messiah?"

For he realized that it was out of jealousy that they had handed him over.

While he was sitting on the judgment seat, his wife sent word to him, "Have nothing to do with that innocent man, for today I have suffered a great deal because of a dream about him."

Now the chief priests and the elders persuaded the crowds to ask for Barabbas, and to have Jesus killed.

The governor again said to them, "Which of the two do you want me to release for you?"

And they said, "Barabbas."

Pilate said to them, "Then what should I do with Jesus who is called the Messiah?"

All of them said, "Let him be crucified!" Then he asked, "Why, what evil has he done?"

But they shouted all the more, "Let him be crucified!"

So, when Pilate saw that he could do nothing, but rather that a riot was beginning, he took some water and washed his hands before the crowd, saying, "I am innocent of this man's blood. See to it yourselves."

Then the people as a whole answered, "His blood be on us and on our children!"

So, he released Barabbas for them, and after flogging Jesus, he handed him over to be crucified. Then the soldiers of the governor took Jesus into the governor's headquarters, and they gathered the whole cohort around him. They stripped him and put a scarlet robe on him, and after twisting some thorns into a crown, they put it on his head.

They put a reed in his right hand and knelt before him and mocked him, saying, "Hail, King of the Jews!"

They spat on him, and took the reed, and struck him on the head. After mocking him, they stripped him of the robe and put his own clothes on him. Then they led him away to crucify him. As they went out, they came upon a man from Cyrene named Simon. They compelled this man to carry his cross.

And when they came to a place called Golgotha (which means Place of a Skull), they offered him wine to drink, mixed with gall; but when he tasted it, he wouldn't drink it. And when they had crucified him, they divided his clothes among themselves by casting lots. Then they sat down there and kept watch over him.

Over his head they put the charge against him, which read, "This is Jesus, the King of the Jews."

Matthew 27:15-37

Figuring out who won is easy. Winners pour champagne on each other. Losers complain about the referees. Winners hold trophies over their heads. Losers hang their heads. Winners smile from ear to ear. Losers grit their teeth. Recognizing who won and who lost seems simple, but the definitions are not always as clear as we think.

A conquering king enters his capital city. People line the street to cheer. A criminal is executed by the government, left to hang as a warning to others. Identifying the winner and loser seems obvious.

At the triumphal entry, Jesus looks like a winner. Trumpets blare, “Hail to the Chief.” The crowds line the street, applaud, and throw palm branches in front of the donkey.

They shout, “Hosanna to the Son of David. Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord.”

This is a ticker tape parade after the Final Four.

The disciples think, “This is the best day ever.”

Jesus looks exactly like they hoped he would. He is the conquering hero. This is when it would be fun to follow Jesus. This is the Christ people like—strong, good-looking, all-American. On Palm Sunday, Jesus looks like a winner.

But on Friday, he does not look like a winner. Pilate offers the choice of a murderer or Jesus. They do not like the criminal, but they can tell who looks like a loser. The soldiers drape a scarlet robe over Jesus’ shoulders and push a crown of thorns on to his head. A walking stick becomes a make-believe scepter. They hit him with it. They spit on him. After they finish roughing him up, Jesus cannot even carry his own cross.

The sign over his head says, “King of the Jews.”

The Romans think it is a great joke.

People yell, “You were supposed to be king. What happened?”

When it becomes clear that Jesus is not going to win, most wander off. The crowd lining the street on Palm

Sunday is a lot bigger than the group of mourners that gathers at the foot of the cross. The cross looks for all the world like defeat.

In the year 400, Nestorius, the Archbishop of Constantinople, wrote, "A born God, a dead God, a buried God I cannot adore."

He could not believe that God could suffer. Nestorius was condemned as a heretic, but he raised a good question. Do we want to follow someone who dies like Jesus?

The disciples don't. They want Palm Sunday. If they had been paying attention, they would have seen it coming. Before Jesus' birth, his mother sang that he was coming to put down the winners and lift up the losers. Jesus' path is not what we choose. Rather than attending the best possible school, taking a cushy job, and trying to impress important people, Jesus spends his time with poor people. He does not finagle for a corner office. He looks for losers to help. Jesus talks to those who are left out. He talks to anyone who knows they are needy.

Sometimes Jesus has problems relating to successful people, those who do not feel needy. The rich young ruler is a winner. He is smart. He takes care of his parents. Selling everything you have and giving it to the poor is not reasonable.

The prodigal son's elder brother is a hard worker. He is the reason the farm is a success. He should get the recognition. The rich man building barns is a hardworking businessperson planning for retirement. We admire people like him.

Jesus keeps criticizing the successful and defending the losers. The people who hang around Jesus are

unimpressive—fishermen, foreigners, prostitutes, the elderly, children, and the sick. Jesus spends his time with people who have messy lives.

He keeps giving his life all the way to the cross. Jesus infuriates the ones who think they Are winners by hanging out with the ones who know they Are losers. Jesus' way is hard. We want to be winners. Who doesn't want an easy life? Of course, our goals reflect the popular understanding of what it means to be successful. Jesus' ideas about what it means to be a winner led to Jesus dying horribly.

In *The Brothers Karamazov*, the Grand Inquisitor comes to interrogate Jesus. He explains that Jesus got it all wrong: "Jesus, you didn't understand. When Satan came to you, Jesus, and said 'Climb up on the pinnacle of the temple and jump down from the pinnacle, and the entire world will come and see who you are,' Jesus, you should have done it. Jesus, when he came to you and he said to you, 'Bow down before me and I will give you all the kingdoms of this earth,' Jesus, you didn't listen to him and look what happened to you. Jesus, we in the church figured it all out and we know how to do it. The church bowed down to Satan and he's given us all the kingdoms of the earth. Jesus, your way didn't work and we've learned his way is better than to do the things you said to do."

We are tempted to do what's easiest. Who in their right mind wants to serve the needy? Why would anyone choose to carry a cross? In his life and his death, Jesus makes it clear that his way is hard.

Jesus goes to the cross and says something he could have skipped, "If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross, and follow

me.”

In the crucifixion, Jesus shows us what love looks like. On Calvary, Christ invites us to love. In the cross, God demands we change our way of thinking.

If Christ was to appear today, would he look like a winner? Isn't Jesus still wearing poor clothes? Isn't Jesus still the servant of the broken-hearted? Aren't we still called to take our place with Christ? God challenges us to run the risk of looking foolish in order to be faithful, care for the one member of our family who is not invited to the reunions, and eat lunch with the co-worker who sits alone.

St. Augustine writes: “What does love look like? Love has the hands to help others. Love has the feet to hasten to the poor and needy. Love has the eyes to see misery and want. Love has the ears to hear the sorrows of one.”

Following Christ is holding hands stiffened by arthritis, sharing food with those who do not have enough, and listening to someone who does not get heard. We serve Christ not by arguing over who is right, but by loving like God loves. God has chosen us to be healers in the midst of brokenness. God has chosen us to be Christ in the world.

In the end, winning and losing is not what most think. The final victory does not go to the ones who applaud on Palm Sunday. The final victory comes in the defeat of the cross. Contemporary crosses have little in common with Jesus' cross. Today's crosses are jewelry for self-assured Christians. The old cross was rough and ugly. The new cross is a trinket meant to be a decoration. The old cross was a condemnation of our selfish way of life. The new cross is an adornment. The old cross was a challenge.

The cross is the darkest spot in all history and the light

by which we understand that Jesus changes the definitions: “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for Christ’s sake will find it.”

To lose yourself in love is to find yourself. When we look honestly at the way Christ lived and died, who would guess that he would be remembered 2,000 years later? Jesus lived his extraordinary life in the hope that we would live the same kind of life, because it is the one true life. Palm Sunday must have been fun, but at this table we remember that God calls us to lay down our tiny aspirations and follow Jesus.

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