

2 Samuel 23:1-7
Luke 23:32-43
Text: Luke 23:35

St. John's Presbyterian Church
Devon, Pennsylvania
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Christ the King Sunday
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LOSING AS WINNING

It may seem at first odd to be visiting a text on the crucifixion only five Sundays before Christmas. But this is Christ the King Sunday, the last Sunday of the Christian year and the cross is a fitting if paradoxical climax to talk about the Kingship of Jesus. Next Sunday begins Advent and with it a new Christian year, and lest we miss the message of Advent's insistence on preparation for the arrival of Jesus, returning to the crucifixion warns us against sliding into that tinsel view of the nativity as mostly froth and popcorn that Madison Avenue prefers. It asks us to consider at his arrival what his end would be—and how could such a thing be for one such as he, and to take all these things and ponder them in our hearts, as Mary did.

The cross was, after all an event that symbolized public shame and humiliation. It seemed to signal Jesus' defeat by the powers of the world. What is going on?

This ambiguity of the cross was brought home to me in a startling way when I attended an economics conference for clergy some years ago. The topic had moved around to the notion of success and what qualifies it. Is it meeting a goal, or exceeding a goal? What if the goal itself is unrealistic, how then? Then the leader, an economist from Duke University asked us a question. When Jesus came to the end of his ministry and lay dying on a cross, was he successful? The speaker took a poll and the ministers were almost evenly divided, 50-50. Many felt the cross to be a sign of Jesus' rejection by the world. Others felt that the cross, horrible though it was, was itself the point of victory. Though the cross as victory can only be maintained in the light of the resurrection. Without the resurrection it is a travesty.

Everyone is represented at the crucifixion; from Jesus' ardent supporters to his worst detractors. The faithful are there, if mingling silently in the crowd. The crowd itself a silent intermingled mass of faithful, curious, and unbelievers. It is startling with what brevity this pivotal event in all of world history is dealt with. In a single phrase we are told, "and they crucified him." The religious leaders are there, taunting him, justifying their own condemnation of him, relishing the specter of the limp figure of the man they have condemned, the life draining out of him on the scaffold. "If you are the Messiah, the anointed one of God, save yourself." The soldiers, too, mock him, "Save yourself." One of the condemned criminals screams in agony at him to do something, to save himself and them. And the bitterly ironic inscription above the bowed and bloodied head of Jesus reads, "*This* is the King of the Jews." It is the ultimate malicious stab at the Jews by the Romans.

Why not save himself? Why not perform a miracle of such stunning proportions, a descent from the cross in the company of a legion of angels such that the world would ever remember? Because it might give an awesome example of the power of God, but it would

encourage total abdication to God's miraculous intervention whenever we needed help. It would leave us with no moral example to follow. It would bypass any consideration of suffering as a redemptive and natural part of life. And it would establish none of the tenacity of God's love for us, as exemplified in Jesus, in the midst of trials and hardships. Perhaps most important, it would leave us with a savior who was not at all like us, one with whom we could never fully identify because his way out of a tough situation would only be to rely on a power of magic that we have no access to.

Yet something even more profound, and powerful is at work in the cross. It has to do with real power. It has to do with losing as winning. The point of the cross for the Roman authorities was very simple—to destroy all opposition by provoking such fear in those who saw it that it deterred any act of resistance. Crucifixion was used for criminal acts and political prisoners, people who threatened the stability of the state. Jesus was judged to be the latter, the two criminals who were with him, probably the former. However, when the innocent are executed the result can be exactly the opposite of the intentions. Smothering a fire leaves a spark that can become a firestorm; a single gunshot produces a revolution; a death the rebirth of a martyr's cause. An ennobling and inspiring spirit is released from the tiniest things.

Of course, Christians know that something more than dying went on here. Christ passed through death. He did not skirt it or somehow evade it but faced it, faced the full abandonment of God—that is what “he descended into hell” means to convey in the creed. Death once defeated—for those who identified with him, was never again to be so wholly dreaded. This is his gift to the faithful. Which is precisely why Paul, the faithful apostle who is sent to Rome to be tried before Nero, does not die at the close of the Book of Acts (indeed, none of the apostles are recorded as dying anywhere in the New Testament). Faith has already signaled for them what Tennyson called “the passing of the bar,” when each sets out on life's last voyage.

Losing virtuously is winning a larger battle. Lions fifty seven, Christians none, is not a victory for Rome. A victory is won in its effects, not in initial score. This is where the real power is; losing as winning.

The recent movie “The Queen” brings back to mind an interview that the BBC did with Princess Diana shortly before her death. It was a quite extraordinary moment in television, and a rare example of the sort of real power that is often assigned as weakness. We are so used to listening to canned and cosmetic answers from politicians and celebrities intent on preserving their public persona. Yet here was a woman, married as a virtual teenager, a pre-school aide shot out of the cannon from a very private to an intensely scrutinized celebrity role as one of the most public figures in the world, perhaps the most public.

I'm not sure what I expected as I started into that program, but what I saw and heard was a young woman, mature beyond her years, who showed extraordinary courage, facing herself and her questioner with uncompromising honesty. I never once saw her deflect a question. Instead she responded immediately, directly and with what seemed to me to be that rarest of qualities, complete self-effacement. She accepted her portion of the blame, laid bare her private sins and evaluated her life and times with moments of exceptional wisdom and insight. In short, Diana exhibited the sort of regal qualities that we long to see in leaders and yet are seldom privileged to view.

This is losing as winning. Neither fighting nor defending, but laying open the soul to public access. Real monarchs are made in the hearts of the people.

Jesus said that we gain the fullness of our lives, paradoxically, by losing them. Losing as winning. Jesus looks out from the cross upon which he is scorned and vilified, looks upon the ranting soldiers and the religious leaders' smugness at having kept their power base, upon the one by his side cursing and hurling obscenities through his pain, and says, "Father, forgive them." In short, he says to the crowd of onlookers, that is, to us, "You are not to be like them. Life will always be well stocked with unpleasant people who hurt and insult you. But you cannot be like that. If you do, we all lose." Jesus consummate victory in the jaws of defeat is that what he wins is not for himself, but for us. When he wins, we all win.

We know better than to stay an unredeemed people. Our weapons are his. They are from a different arsenal, and they are ultimately invincible: forgiveness, grace, forbearance, peace, justice, love. These are the only tools that can build the real kingdom, the domain of King Jesus, even as, in our using them, we may appear to be losing.

Amen