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“Are You a Loser? I Hope So!”
Text: Mark 8:27-38 (Romans 5:1-11)

Grace, mercy, and peace to you from God our Father, and from our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ. Amen.

The twelve had been with Jesus for some time now. They had witnessed a great many things and had received no small amount of teaching. Now it was the end of the semester - time for an examination, an evaluation. That they might confess the faith that they had been given.

Who do you say that I am?

They had already rehearsed for Jesus the opinions and confessions of others. It is plain that people held Jesus in very high regard to put Him in the company of John the Baptist, Elijah, and the prophets. It is the same in our day and age. Many hold Jesus in high regard, confessing Him to be an exceptional man, a prophet, or even the greatest teacher the world has ever known. But as you know, there is more to Jesus than that.

But who do you say that I am?

Peter answers correctly, as spokesman for the twelve: You are not just what the others are saying of you; you are more than that. ***You are the Christ***, the Anointed One, the Promised One. Well done, Peter. Well *confessed*.

So on to the next step, the next semester of learning - *what that means*; what the Christ is going to do, or what is going to be done to Him. He's going to be **a loser**. He's going to **suffer**, not rejoice. He's going to be **rejected**, not praised. He's going to be **killed**, not enthroned. Yet **after three days rise again. And He said this plainly**. He said this confidently, boldly, and openly. Not that this *might* happened, but that it *will*. And not only that it will, that it **must**.

This next step in the learning curve is going to be a steep and difficult one for the twelve. And Peter does not start this semester off well. He hears the words *suffer, rejected, and killed*, and has heard enough. If he heard the part about rising again, it doesn't register with him; he doesn't understand it. But instead of asking Jesus about all this and what it means and listening and learning, he **takes Jesus aside** and not too gently tells Him: *No, Jesus. That's not going to happen. The Christ isn't a loser, He's a winner! Stop speaking like that. You're going to be fine.*

Well, there's a grain of truth to that. Jesus is going to win and He will be fine. But this ***must*** happen. And anyone who denies it or tries to stop it is anti-Christ and must be rebuked. So what starts off well ends with those stinging words from Jesus: ***Get behind me, Satan! For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.***

And then Jesus doubles down. Peter doesn't want Him to talk this way, but He will - and not only to the twelve, but to the crowd too. ***If anyone would come after me, don't think it's going to be all glory and happiness! Let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.*** This kingdom comes through losing and death.

Jesus will repeat this teaching to the twelve several more times, so difficult it is. And they still won't get it . . . until after it is finished, until after the resurrection, so contrary does it seem to all human reason and thinking.

So now what about you?

Today you answered the question put forth by Jesus as we confessed together the Creed. And with the advantage of living after Jesus' death and resurrection, you know how it turns out and confessed that too: *He was crucified, suffered, buried, and on the third day rose again.* That is the truth. Well done, dear Christians. Well *confessed*.

Now what?

If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. Or let me paraphrase that for you: **you must become a loser too.**

What'd you say, Pastor . . . ? You didn't just say what I think you said! That's not how this works. You're mistaken. Jesus makes us winners, not losers. Stop speaking like that. Besides, it's not good for outreach and evangelism.

Do you see? If that's our attitude, if that's how we think, then how just like Peter we are! We want to follow Jesus, ***but*** . . . we don't want to do without, we don't want crosses and death, we don't want to be losers. ***No Jesus! This will never happen to . . . me*** (cf. Matthew 16:22)! But it ***must***. ***For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.***

This is a hard teaching - but a good one for this season of Lent. No sugar coating it. The kingdom of God comes through losing and death. **The kingdom of God is for losers.**

Now, I'm using that word - *loser* - both because Jesus did and that you might hear those words the way Peter and the others and the crowd did. For to take up your cross would have meant only one thing back then: you were a loser and were about to lose your life.

And that we react so much against that idea is an indication of just how much the wisdom of the world and our own sinful nature influences us and pulls us away from Jesus - *even as Christians*. For we don't want to be a loser. We want to make something of ourselves. We want to make Jesus proud of us. And so we hang on to our lives, we hang on to our good works, we hang on to our accomplishments and pride and honor, we hang on to the person we want to be and are trying to make ourselves be. A good and righteous person, *worthy* of Jesus dying for.

But those things we're hanging on to? They're our false gods. And they're our false gods because we're looking to those things for who we are and what we want to be and what we need. That's why we don't want to let go of them, because then what would I have? Then I'd be . . . **a loser**.

But whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.

So here's the good news: **Jesus died for losers**. That's what St. Paul said earlier in the Epistle: ***Christ died for the ungodly. For one will scarcely die for a righteous person—though perhaps for a good person one would dare even to die—*** [that's the wisdom of the world] ***but God shows his love for us in that while we were still sinners, - while we were still losers - Christ died for us.***

That's why we begin every Divine Service with *another* confession - of our sins, confessing that yes, I am a loser. And if that's not what you're thinking when you say those words, take some time this week to really examine yourself and your life and all you do every week. Do you love God with all you heart and soul and mind and strength? Do you love your neighbor as yourself? Far from it, right? In fact, if you're like me, my first impulse is to love me, serve me, and desire others to do the same. *And I like it that way*. Which means that according to the Word of God, **I am a loser**, a poor, miserable sinner.

So each and every week we confess that, that we might believe it and learn to let go of all that stuff I'm trying to hang on to, my life that I'm trying to hang on to. And then we hear the words of Absolution, words, really, of resurrection: *I forgive you*. I died for you. To give you everything. And it must be this way. For whatever you can do and gain in this life will last only for this life. But what Jesus has done and gives will last forever.

And with that faith, that faith which believes and receives the promises of God in Jesus, that makes you a winner, right? Well, yes, but really it enables you to be even more of a loser! But this time, in a good way.

Losing your pride to humble yourself for others.

Losing your right for revenge and forgiving others.

Losing your stuff in order to provide for the needs of others.

Losing your time for those who need your help, your prayers.

Losing all, and yet really losing nothing. For Christ is providing all you need, and will continue to do so.

Now, you'll never do all that, and never do it perfectly. You're never going to like being a loser and you'll never get used to it. We have to fight our sinful nature everyday. And that's why Jesus said, ***If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me.*** That is, do battle with your sinful nature everyday, and kill it. Kill it in repentance and being raised to life again in Jesus' forgiveness. Kill it by living in that forgiveness by serving others and not yourself. Kill it by being a loser, and relying on nothing but the word and promises of Jesus.

As I said, that's never going to be easy, and if you're like most Christians, you'll even think you're getting worse and worse at it, not better! But it may not be so. You may simply be growing in faith and learning to see your sin more and more. That's why we can never rely on what we think or feel or see - all those things will deceive us and mislead us. What we can rely on are the words and promises of Jesus. His word of forgiveness, His word of blessing, His word that we heard today, that ***whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it.*** Of that you can be sure. For that's what Jesus did for you, and is giving to you. And He who gave Himself for you is hanging on to you.

So come now to the Table of the Lord, fellow losers, for here is a promise for you too: *Take, eat, this is My Body. Take, drink, this is My Blood of the New Testament, given and shed for you for the forgiveness of your sins. And this true Body and Blood of our Lord and Saviour Jesus Christ will strengthen and preserve you steadfast unto everlasting life. Depart in peace. Amen.* And it is so.

In the Name of the Father, and of the (+) Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.