

September 16, 2018 – Welcome to Baptism Naomi Stine, Baptism of Logan Nieves  
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Mark 8:27-38

## Winners and Losers

“Winning isn’t everything, it’s the only thing.” That’s a well-known saying about winning. Or another “winning” statement, along the same lines, “The person who said winning isn’t everything, never won anything.” Or yet another statement on winning that you may have heard, “We’re going to win so much, you’ll be sick of winning.”

And then we have scripture—which says something very different. Today the gospel offers us a loser, a total loser. That total loser is Jesus, and he wants you to be a loser, too.

The scene is Caesarea Philippi. We might breeze right by the name of the city, probably not a place you’ve been to, and it’s now nearly uninhabited, though it once was quite the place. We might skip right over the setting, except that in Mark’s gospel location is always something more: Mark maps meaning in geography. So we might note that “Caesarea” sounds like Caesar. And, in fact, Caesarea Philippi is a city that paid homage to, was obsequious to, empire, the man in power. In addition to a telling name, Caesarea Philippi was known for the white marble temple that King Herod built there. Herod built it to honor his patron, Rome, and its deities—that’s the kind of temple Herod, a Jew, built there. Do we know that location? Do we know about ostentatious, obsequious temples to idolatry? Have you ever been to one of those? I have. We have them here in this city, and in other cities. As Jesus heads with his disciples to Caesarea Philippi, the scene is set for the question of who Jesus is, what leadership is, who to follow.

Jesus asks his disciples just this question: do they know who he is? They’ve been with him some time, do they understand what’s he’s about? Peter seems to, initially. Peter says that Jesus is the Messiah. Peter’s got the title right, and so Jesus explains what that title means. It means a lot of losing. It means suffering. It means rejection. It means dying.

Peter does not find this appealing. Peter finds this appalling, and he tells Jesus, privately. Peter pulls Jesus aside, perhaps trying to protect him. Jesus’ response to this is sharp and public, Jesus will not be protected, least of all by Peter. Jesus minces no words telling Peter and the other disciples what that advice is worth, “Get behind me, Satan!” And then Jesus calls even more people together, he gathers a crowd and continues this theme of leading by losing, he makes his announcement about his losership all the more public. But Jesus doesn’t just tell more people about it, he tells them it’s about them, too. They, too—we too—anyone who would be his disciple must be a loser, must lose their life, deny themselves, take up their cross, experience suffering, hardship, great difficulty.

This is a difficult saying—way different from the facile ones with which I began this sermon. If we are to have any hope of understanding what Jesus is saying about becoming his followers; if we going to have any sense of what Jesus means, we first need to be clear about what Jesus doesn’t mean.

First of all, Jesus is not saying that followers of his should be sadomasochistic. Jesus is not suggesting that suffering is enjoyable, or pretty. What Jesus says does not put lipstick on a canker sore. Neither should we.

Next, Jesus is not negating the significance of the self, that unique and special something that makes you you. God made that you, and calls it good, as Genesis reminds us. God hates nothing God has made, as the prayer for Ash Wednesday reminds us. We should not despise

ourselves. We will be called upon to deny ourselves. Note that it requires a self to deny a self. Self-denial does not mean self-erasure, or self-abasement.

Third, Jesus does not mean that those who suffer are just stuck with it. Sadly, people sometimes use this saying to suggest just that. People will tell someone going through a hard time, “Well, that’s just your cross to bear.” Jesus does not say that and neither should we. Jesus does not excuse or explain away misery or, God save us, tell people to remain in an abusive situation. Nothing about this saying suggests we should be complacent about suffering. Jesus certainly wasn’t. Jesus devoted himself to alleviating suffering. Jesus gave the ultimate sacrifice to end it.

Here is what I think Jesus is saying here. Here’s what the leader of those who would call themselves Christian says about self-denial, cross, and loss.

First of all: no, it’s not fun, but suffering exists. Or as Jesus puts it in another gospel: “In this world you will have suffering.” Anyone who tells you “it’s all win, win, win” is not to be trusted. Call it corruption, call it sin, call it evil, it exists. We should not pretend otherwise, or, like Peter, think it is avoidable or not to be mentioned aloud. There’s something Satanic about that, about denying the terrible toll of a broken world. It will exert its toll on us, as it did on Jesus. There is honesty, and maturity, in acknowledging this; and the comfort of companionship in pain, and, ultimately, redemption. Our Messiah is with us in suffering. As Dietrich Bonhoeffer wrote from a prison cell, “Only a suffering God can help.”

Second, Jesus is very interested in the self, in the life of the self, in the preservation and saving of the self. What good does it do you, Jesus asks, if you gain the whole world, but lose your life? In Greek, the word that’s translated here as life is *psuche*. *Psuche*, which is related to the word psyche, has wide connotations, *psuche* means not just one’s life but one’s mind and soul, one’s whole, holy self. If you gain the whole world but do not have that, what do you have? You could be rich beyond measure, and it wouldn’t profit you a thing. Jesus is very interested in the well-being of selves. That’s why he calls us to deny ourselves. Perhaps this sounds paradoxical, like losing a life to save it. But as anyone who has overcome anything will tell you, as anyone who has ever achieved anything will tell you, self-denial leads to self-development. Far from being self-abnegation, self-denial expands the self, expands who we are, expands what we know about ourselves, and about others, and about God.

Third, knowing that suffering exists and that selves are precious things, we are careful. We make special efforts to be with and care for people in hard places. We seek them out. That’s not human nature, some may say, humans are wired and conditioned to avoid pain and pursue pleasure. But Jesus reminds us that we are made and molded to be more than this. Our natures are made in another image, and we can set our minds on this. As it happens, we have a great example of our ability to do this front and center in worship today, the infants before us today. What do I mean by this? I’m hoping one of our babies will cry at some point, to illustrate what I mean, because when a baby cries, when a baby makes its pain known, you do not move away from it, you move toward it. That is what we are called to do, as Christians. That is the mark of a Christian community, that when we see hardship, when we see suffering, we don’t run away from it, we run toward it. That is what it means to take up the cross: that when we see suffering, when we see someone who is rejected, or wrapped in grief, when we see injustice or advantage being taken, we don’t ignore it, or avoid it, we step toward it, fully aware that in doing so we are taking up a cross, following the Christ.

Be a loser like that. Put God’s priorities ahead of personal security and present comfort. Be a loser like that, and see what victory is.