

Second Sunday in Lent
March 8, 2009
Mark 8:31-38
Pr. Craig M. Mueller

A LOT TO LOSE

Who wants to be a millionaire? There are books on it. And of course, the popular game show. It's the American dream. How to gain the whole world--in other words, happiness and security.

But what we have today is a pretty dismal, if not challenging, reversal of that. Who wants to be a loser? That seems to be what Jesus is saying today. Lose everything. Deny yourself. Take up your cross. And follow.

Come on. Lent can be hard enough. Bare branches instead of flowers. Songs in a minor key. Stripping things down to essentials. Fasting and prayer and works of love. Getting down to serious business. But don't you think Jesus is going too far in today's gospel? Try to save your life and you'll lose it. Lose your life for the sake of your faith and you'll find it. That might make sense in a time when Christians were persecuted for their faith. Or when martyrs were killed for their beliefs. But doesn't it sound like a "lose-lose" proposition to you?

This place prides itself on a message of radical hospitality. That all people are welcome here. That's love is unconditional. Period.

Then Jesus comes along with this Lenten message of discipleship. Of self-sacrifice. Of commitment. Challenging us to the core. We want the sermons to be upbeat in this church. Infused with a sense of humor now and then, or at least a reference to Facebook or iPods. We want our brand of Christianity to be cutting edge. Cool. Maybe even fun. But oh, Jesus, your words today are anything but that.

Who wants to follow a loser? Sure, Jesus attracts some crowds now and then. But when the going got tough nearly everyone flees. His message is simply too radical. He challenges the status quo. He takes risks for the sake of the marginalized. And look where that gets him--nailed to a cross!

Now I know that crosses can be beautiful. People wear them around their neck. Some are gold or jeweled. People honor the cross. Perhaps bow as it passes. Some even kiss it on Good Friday.

We mark the foreheads of those baptized with a cross. Saying they are marked with the cross forever. That we are called to follow in the path of Jesus' dying and rising. This morning we will sign crosses not only on the forehead--but on the ears, eyes, lips, shoulders, feet, hands and hearts of four adults in our community preparing for baptism at the Easter Vigil. Certainly this marking declares that our bodies are good, a sign of God's presence. Certainly we proclaim that God will be with us through whatever crosses come our way.

But a cross? It's a sign of loss. And who wants to be a loser? Couldn't we attract more people if we processed with a dollar bill on a pole? Or a clock--promising ways to make the most of our time? Or better yet, a perfectly sculpted body--giving credence to what the advertisers promise will bring us sex appeal?

Wouldn't we better off promising success and popularity, fame and fortune? The churches that are growing in this country often give the message that if you believe in Jesus and trust God you will be blessed. That good things will happen to you. I can see "net gain" there. But if we preach the cross we have a lot to lose, don't we?

The thing is: we are always losing things. And I don't mean misplacing things as we get older. To be human is to face loss. Losses of people that we love. Loss of dreams and unrealistic expectations. Loss of health. Loss of youth. And that's not even mentioning losses in the stock market!

Most of the time we fight these losses. We do everything we can to deny them. To not think about them. To busy ourselves with other thoughts and distractions. And often it simply brings more disappointment and dis-ease.

Yet there is spiritual wisdom in all this loss talk--in losing our lives to find them. Sometimes it means giving ourselves to a cause greater than ourselves. Perhaps standing up for those who are poor, or marginalized, or oppressed. Sometimes it means making a commitment. Finding a new discipline. Getting off our butts and making a difference in the world. Moving from whining about all that's wrong with our lives and the world and finding the joy in every day, every moment.

Yet at other times embracing our losses may mean being fully open to whatever life presents us. Even if it's not what we had in mind. A young man I know finds himself with a temporary job he didn't expect. In the middle of nowhere. Barely making enough money to pay off school loans. Life doesn't seem to be opening doors for him. And yet he continues to be surprised by people and places and experiences that are opening his heart. He has learned that he isn't in control. Letting go and surrendering to "what is" is a little like losing yourself.

This past week I heard another story on WBEZ that begins by naming how bad things are now: "Jobs are being lost, companies are shedding jobs; shedding like a snake sheds its dead skin or a dog sheds its dead hair."

This couple in the story faced losses of their own. Tom was laid off after 9/11. Then Karen was diagnosed with cancer. Out of the blue they faced a nightmare of no income and a major health crisis. They realized they had a choice. They could either stand against that wall, feeling desperate and helpless. Or they could change directions. They realized that there is an up side to down. Or to use language from our scriptures today: when you have a lot to lose, there is a lot to gain as well.

In mid-life the couple made bold moves, born out of desperation, but the decisions saved their lives. Tom went to graduate school and Karen started writing as if her life depended on it. Their advice to us in these difficult times: turn crisis into opportunity.¹

The season of Lent has lessons to teach us. The seasons of loss have wisdom to impart us well. It's OK, perhaps even good, to struggle with Jesus' words about losing our lives. About self-denial. About taking up the cross. But remember: baptism is a struggle. A daily struggle against all the things that lead us from the love of God and neighbor.

Who wants to be a loser? Good question. But if the journey takes us to Easter--to spring--to transformation--it's worth it.

¹Karen Brenner on *Eight Forty-Eight*, WBEZ radio, March 4, 2009