HOW TO BE A LOSER

You’d think everybody was a loser, the way one public official talks. If that’s a way to get attention, so is my idea for a book. How about this title? How to Be a Loser. It probably wouldn’t sell any copies. No one wants to lose at the stock market. No wants to make the World Series and not win it. No one wants to be the runner-up for the coveted job. No one wants to come up short with online dating. No one wants to be one of the families in Houston that lost everything.

Scan your life and think of the times you’ve been the loser. In order to have winners, there have to be losers, but who wants to be one?

Peter scored big time in last Sunday’s gospel. Peter won the ultimate compliment from Jesus after confessing him to be the Messiah. Jesus calls him rock. And tells him that the church will be built on his confession of faith. Peter wins! He is the most famous, the most remembered of all the twelve apostles. Who else has a church like St. Peter’s in Rome built in honor of them?

But slow down. Last week’s gospel morphs into this week’s. Jesus tells the disciples that his mission as Messiah will lead to suffering and death. And that infuriates Peter. In fact, Peter thinks Jesus is a loser for talking that way. Peter expects a warrior-like king, a winner who would liberate the Israelites from the Romans.

But Jesus rebukes Peter. Peter the rock becomes Peter the stumbling block. Peter is now the loser as Jesus says to him, “Get behind me, Satan!” Wow, that’s strong stuff. Get out of the way, Peter, he seems to be saying. You are setting your mind not on divine things, but on human things.

And then Jesus suggests that the way to find your life is through losing it—becoming a loser. What, Jesus? Early Christians took that very literally. Martyrs were persecuted for their faith. They lost this life only to become a winner as they entered paradise. It doesn’t seem like many Christians are signing up for this winning plan today, regardless of whether they are Bible-based conservatives or social justice liberals.

Maybe we are called to be losers. Yet in an era when people are trying to find themselves, to find purpose, to find meaning, to find success, to find love, to find happiness, the message of “how to be a loser,” deny yourself and take up your cross sounds . . . like a losing proposition.

Except in losing our lives, we find them. And I can think of three ways that such a message might ring true for us. First, we are going to lose our lives, literally. We are going to die. And when we face that truth, when we stop living in denial, when we come face to face with our mortality, many times it is then that we begin to truly live. When discussing today’s gospel earlier this week, one person said it reminded her of these lyrics from Leonard Cohen’s popular song “Suzanne”: And Jesus was a sailor when he walked upon the water / And he spent a long time watching from his lonely wooden tower / And when he knew for certain only drowning men could see him.

Mystery. Paradox. Riddle. Call it what you like. When we are drowning, when we are dying, when we struggling, when we are losing, we see anew God’s mercy, and the vast beauty of our lives.

Secondly, on this Labor Day weekend, I would suggest that we lose our lives for the sake of others through our work, our vocation. Most of us want to make a difference with our lives. Sometimes people tell me that they don’t think that their work is as noble as others who are clearly making the world a better place. But our Lutheran heritage reminds us that whatever we do, we are serving the common good, and thus, serving God. Clerks, janitors, teachers, bankers, construction workers, accountants, the list is endless. All human occupations serve God’s purpose whether we acknowledge it or not.
Our baptism frees us to lose our lives in service to our neighbor. What good news! Paul is eloquent in giving us our charge: “Let love be genuine. Outdo one another in showing honor. Contribute to the needs of the saints. Practice hospitality. Live in harmony with one another. Associate with the lowly. Do not repay evil for evil. And live peaceably with all.”

And finally, being a loser means looking at our own losses and finding in them the hidden presence of God. Think back to the greatest losses you have faced in your life. You would certainly not have chosen them. But they now define you. They are part of your story. Most of us want a loss-free life, a perfect life, a life void of suffering and pain. But that does not seem to be what is built into the universe.

Martin Luther wrote about the theology of the cross. It’s not that God wants us to suffer. It’s not that God wills people to be losers. It’s not that victims of injustice should bear their suffering in silence. Rather, out of these experiences of loss, God births new life. In fact, we see God’s power hidden in the vulnerability of the manger and the cross. Think of it: Jesus is the ultimate loser whose resurrection is his vindication. And because of God’s mercy we now stand with all those the world declares to be losers: those that are poor and mentally ill, those who are hated because of their race or religion.

So let’s learn how to be losers, following Christ the loser in death, yet risen and present among us at this table. Let us take up the cross, let us follow the cross from here into our daily lives, and into the world . . . and find more than we could ever imagine.