

Luke 23:33-43

When they came to the place that is called The Skull, they crucified Jesus there with the criminals, one on his right and one on his left. Then Jesus said, "Father, forgive them; for they do not know what they are doing." And they cast lots to divide his clothing. And the people stood by, watching; but the leaders scoffed at him, saying, "He saved others; let him save himself if he is the Messiah of God, his chosen one!" The soldiers also mocked him, coming up and offering him sour wine, and saying, "If you are the King of the Jews, save yourself!" There was also an inscription over him, "This is the King of the Jews."

One of the criminals who were hanged there kept deriding him and saying, "Are you not the Messiah? Save yourself and us!" But the other rebuked him, saying, "Do you not fear God, since you are under the same sentence of condemnation? And we indeed have been condemned justly, for we are getting what we deserve for our deeds, but this man has done nothing wrong." Then he said, "Jesus, remember me when you come into your kingdom." He replied, "Truly I tell you, today you will be with me in Paradise."

So this is the end. Today we have read the last scripture passage on the last Sunday of the Christian calendar. Next week, we start all over again with Advent and preparing for Christmas. But for now, this is the end.

The interesting thing about the end is that we call it “Reign of Christ” Sunday. Today we celebrate the fact that there was an actual human being named Jesus of Nazareth, the poor son of a tradesman, who lived 33 years on this earth. In his life he spoke about God, and love, and restoration, and fantastic role reversals. Along the way he brought healing: physical, spiritual, and mental healing to people from all walks of life — men and women, slaves and free, Jews and Gentiles alike. His purpose was to change the way human beings have looked and still look at life and living, turning it upside down and instead showing us a better way of relating to God, to each other, and to ourselves.

And for all that teaching, for all that healing, for all that opening of people’s eyes and ears, Jesus was rewarded by being arrested, tried, and crucified, dying a most horrible and humiliating death.

That is where the story ends today: with Jesus hanging on his cross, his last act before dying was to forgive the very people who killed him and, in particular, to forgive an actual criminal, one who admitted he himself broke the law. Our last glimpse of Jesus is of a man forgiving and loving even as he was suffering and dying.

Now I ask you, does that make any sense in terms of the way we have been brought up to view the world? Of course not. The world, as we know it, is divided into two categories: winners and losers. There is no in between. The winners of the world have fame, wealth, power, and status. The winners of the world associate exclusively with winners like them. The winners of the world are not afraid to show off their status with fancy cars, expensive clothes, and huge houses. The winners of the world are not afraid of using their power to crush anyone who gets in their way. They have armies of lawyers and are surrounded by platoons of “yes men” to do their bidding. Woe to any loser like me who dares challenge a winner. You only need to scan the headlines to learn for yourself how the winners in every place and of every nationality viciously treat the losers in their countries.

Naturally, in the world view we have come to know and accept, the losers, dare I say, the losers like me and losers like you, far outnumber the winners of the world. But the entire point of being a winner is to insure that winners and only winners stay winners!

As some ponder the events currently shredding our nation, polarizing it in ways not seen perhaps since the Civil War, it is fairly easy to see what is at the heart of these issues. People who have, up to now, considered themselves to be the winners of the world and have been taught from childhood that they are entitled to be automatically better than the losers — well, these self-proclaimed

winners are now finding that the world that validated and nurtured their status as winners is changing, and changing in ways they do not like.

Even twenty years ago, even to an extent today, white, Protestant males like me were the undisputed winners of society. The way laws were written, the way attitudes and expectations were portrayed and reinforced in the movies and on TV, the way education was structured, the way pay was determined, the decisions on who got what job: societies all over the world were and still are mostly structured to favor men in general and in this country, white Protestant heterosexual men in particular.

As we know from every day in the news, when you threaten winners, they get mad. They hate. They hurt. They proclaim the lie that the present order, the order that benefits them the most, is actually the best order for everyone. Look at the record, look at how we in our country have treated the actual majority of our people. How often was it argued for example, from the halls of Congress to countless church pulpits, that African-Americans ought to be grateful that they were slaves because they were too stupid handle freedom on their own.

How many times was it argued, and still argued that women in this country don't have the "killer instinct" needed to survive in the business world or fight in the military. No, women are supposedly too weak and soft and fearful. Women, it is still said in our country, can only survive when they are supported by a strong man to look after them.

And, of course, the list goes on. It is said even now that the love between two persons of the same gender is somehow inferior to the love of couples of opposite genders. Therefore, gay and lesbian marriages cannot be equivalent to heterosexual marriage and LGBTQI couples cannot be good parents. In addition, sadly, the idea is very popular that most immigrants are thieves and criminals who come to this country for the sole purpose of destroying our society and taking our resources.

As far as the winners are concerned, all these things are threats and threats must be eliminated. Jesus was a threat to the established order of his day, so naturally he had to be eliminated.

But let's look at the losers of the world. We losers, who go about our daily business of working at our jobs, tending to our families, enjoying the people we love, and paying the price whether it is in unfair taxation, or prejudice, or discrimination, or fake news. We who exist just to support the so-called winners. What about us, the losers of the world?

Let us be clear, the chief loser of the world must be Jesus. I get upset sometimes when I see artistic portrayals of Jesus sitting on a vast throne, dressed in costly clothing and wearing a gold crown. I know the artists are trying to portray Jesus' power in a way we can relate to. Yes, these pictures portray Jesus as they would portray an earthly king, exuding wealth and power from every pore. But Jesus said frequently that his kingdom was not of this world. By the standards of the world, the world we are part of, the world that we, for the most part, have go along with because we have little choice, Jesus is a loser.

A big problem in truly embracing our faith in Jesus is that we have become so brainwashed, so captivated by our current ways of thinking that we have a hard time accepting what a loser Jesus is by our standards. Therefore, we have tried to transform our churches and our theology into celebrating winners and winning. So yes, you have the fancy King Jesus of art. So yes, you have church building adorned in gold and silver and beautiful wood paneling, competing with other churches to see who has the nicest building or the nicest landscaping. So yes, we have thousands of preachers offering a so-called “prosperity gospel” claiming that acquiring wealth and power are actually signs that God loves you best. So yes, we have church hierarchies denying and even bringing lawsuits against people who dare accuse priests and ministers who abuse children, seduce members, and steal money. So yes, we have plenty of churches filled with people who listen to messages defending political and business leaders whose actual lives reflect not one bit of what Jesus taught, yet these so called churches dare to teach that following immoral leaders is what winners do!

And yes, there are churches which are in denial about everything and just putter along, still thinking they, too, are winners.

But according to the standards of this world, Jesus Christ is the ultimate loser. We, who claim to be his followers, must totally embrace Jesus as a loser if are to start to understand his life, mission, and ministry.

Jesus was not a “nice guy.” Yes, the words he said and the healings he performed made him a hit with losers like us. But to the winners in his world, Jesus was decidedly not a nice guy. He threatened to disrupt the world of the winners and challenged them frequently. How?

Jesus the loser was the champion of widows and orphans. He hung out with prostitutes and tax collectors. He brought healing to a soldier of the Roman Empire. He used the hated Samaritans as examples of how people should treat each other. He lived very simply, owning nothing but the clothes on his back and having no permanent place to live. His message was directed toward the rest of the losers, the people who had nothing, the people whom the system reminded daily that God hated them and they were unwelcome.

Isn't our world filled with such losers today? Perhaps you even know some of them. I'm thinking about the man who gave up a promising career to take care of his dying parents. I'm thinking about the mother who works two jobs to provide for her children — and takes online courses. I'm thinking about the teenager who has no hope in life and gets hooked on OxyContin because it gives him a release from his internal pain. I'm thinking about the millions and billions of people all over this world who simply want to have access to enough food, clean water, good health, education, shelter, and clothing and are perfectly willing to work daily to obtain these things without hurting anybody. In short, I'm thinking about the stories I've heard here at Collingswood and at every other place I have ministered. Because I follow Jesus Christ, I am, by definition, a loser myself and a pastor to losers because my Lord and Savior is the ultimate loser.

We close the Christian year with a picture of suffering Jesus on his cross and calling that the Reign of Christ. How, how, how could a suffering Jesus be a King to anybody or anything?

Well, friends, suffering Jesus is indeed King to nothing and nobody unless, unless, unless we are willing and able to turn our thinking about life upside down. Jesus makes one request of us: that we put him first. If we put him first, when we put him first, as much as we try to put him first, Jesus will more and more become the king of our lives and we will increasingly think like him and act like him and be like him.

The core of the Christian promise is this, and it is something no other human organization or human religion offers. The more we think like Jesus and act like Jesus and be like Jesus, the more our lives will change. When we think and act like Jesus, the priorities of our lives will change — and change for the better. We will have a new way of determining what is and is not important. We will be able to look at this world foolishly defined in terms of “winners” and “losers” and realize the true winners of this world are the ones who love God and each other and, yes even themselves. The true winners of this world believe that when Jesus forgives our sins, week after week after week, that forgiveness is genuine and we can start all over again. The true winners of this world are the ones who know that life is not about fame or possessions or status or money but life is really about caring about friends and enemies equally, working to lift up those in need, and forgiving ourselves of whatever we have done in the past so that we know we can start anew.

Paradise. Two criminals, real criminals, were crucified alongside Jesus. One of them taunted Jesus and told Jesus that because he was a king, he should save himself and them as well. But the other criminal, no matter what he did, in spite of what he did, even because of what he did, could look at Jesus hanging beside him and seek his forgiveness — and, when Jesus forgave him, believed it. And when that happened, when that criminal believed the good news of Jesus, delivered from the cross itself, that man knew he was in paradise.

Friends, paradise is not a place in the sweet by-and-by. Paradise is not some resting point after we die. No paradise is here and now. Paradise is real. Paradise can be experienced by every one of us in this room if we, when we, embrace that loser hanging, bleeding, dying on a cross, and then shouting to God, “Yes, Jesus is my king, Jesus is my Lord, Jesus is my Savior!” When you say these words — and believe them in your heart, you, too, will join that criminal and millions and millions more just like him, and be with the true and only king. Jesus of Nazareth, the Lord.

I say these words in the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.