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Winner Takes All

Luke 9:18-24

Once when Jesus was praying in private and his disciples were with him, he asked them, “Who do the crowds say I am?” They replied, “Some say John the Baptist; others say Elijah; and still others, that one of the prophets of long ago has come back to life.” “But what about you?” he asked. “Who do you say I am?” Peter answered, “The Christ of God.” Jesus strictly warned them not to tell this to anyone. And he said, “The Son of Man must suffer many things and be rejected by the elders, chief priests and teachers of the law, and he must be killed and on the third day be raised to life.” Then he said to them all: “If anyone would come after me, he must deny himself and take up his cross daily and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.

FOLLOWING CHRIST MEANS LOSING ALL TO GAIN OUTRIGHT VICTORY

I. We All Want Victory

You’ve probably heard the expression “winner take all.” In honor of Canada Day last Thursday and of our national election I looked up the phrase in the Canadian Oxford Dictionary. It says, “Winner-take-all: denoting the attitude or approach of a person whose sole objective is outright victory.” Whose **sole objective** is **outright victory**. In other words, someone who won’t let **no thing** and **no one** stand in the way of what she wants.

Today is the Fourth of July – Independence Day for the United States. Two hundred and twenty eight years ago there was no thing and no one who could stand in the way of a bunch of Americans winning freedom from England. They were willing to sacrifice *everything* - even their *lives* – for the sake of freedom. Their **sole objective** was **outright victory** – no matter what the cost. Winner-take-all, you might say.

In today’s Gospel lesson, Peter tells Jesus that he and the disciples have been telling others that he is the Christ of God. That’s an important point: Jesus doesn’t ask the disciples who they *think* he is. He doesn’t ask who they *believe* he is. He asks who they *say* – who they’re telling others – he is. Then Jesus explains what it means that he is the Christ. He explains his path to victory – his sole objective and mission. He will “**suffer many things.**” He will “**be rejected by the elders, chief priests, and teachers of the law.**” He will finally “**be killed,**” and then “**on the third day rise again.**” That’s the game plan – the program – the sole objective for God’s Christ.

Then comes the kicker – Jesus tells the disciples that anyone who wants to follow him they have to make his objective their own. His cross and death will become their cross and death. Only then can his outright victory be their victory, too. You might say that the approach of anyone following Jesus, whose sole objective is outright victory, has to be “loser-take-all.” Like your fore-fathers and mothers who fought in the war for independence, we need to be willing to sacrifice everything, even our lives, daily, if we want to be followers of Christ.

II. We All Want to Save Our Lives

Thing is, there are very few people in the US today who feel strongly about anything other than their own skin. That's why our churches are emptying. That's why America is quickly and quietly sliding from its position as one of the greatest nations in the history of the world to a has-been, drowning in its own depravity and decadence.

Deb and I went to a pastors' policy briefing at 7:00 am in King of Prussia Monday morning. Senator Rick Santorum, Ambassador Alan Keys, and Pastor Larry White from one of our sister churches in Houston all spoke. Two phrases stick in my mind from the speeches. The first is from Alan Keys – “The Republic of the United States is not dying,” he told us, “It is already dead.” It is dead because the focus of our people – and I lay particular blame on my generation and my parents' generation – turned in on themselves. They made their sole objective in life victory in the game of possessions, of leisure, of self-pleasure. They're attitude was “winner-take-all,” alright – winner take the biggest house, the biggest cars, the most food, the best husband or wife. The seven deadly sins – especially gluttony, lust and greed – are now hailed as the seven steps on the ladder to success.

The second line I remember is a quote from Senator Santorum: “Every morning people get up and tell themselves lies so they can get through the day.” We tell ourselves the lie that the millions of unborn children sacrificed every day on the altar of expediency is not our problem. We tell ourselves the lie that somebody else will protect our freedom, that somebody else will teach our children for a wage we would never accept for ourselves, that our children will figure out morality and religion for themselves. We tell ourselves the lie that we can accept rising levels of poverty and crime in our cities, rising levels of minimum wage employment, rising levels of children and adults with no health-care, and still have our nice, cushy lives. We tell ourselves the lie that children aren't affect by broken marriages, that men and women can live together without marriage with no long-lasting impact on society, and that men can marry men and women can marry women, and that God will still – still! – bless America – that he will indeed “bless this mess!” We tell ourselves those lies because if we didn't, we wouldn't be able to get out of bed in the morning.

What I've said about America is, unfortunately and to our shame, true about the Christian church. In our desperate attempt to save our lives and the lives of our churches, we have laid down our crosses and picked up comfy pews, air conditioned sanctuaries, music that tickles our ears and beliefs that tickle our hearts. If I had a dollar for everyone who's told me that “I” can't tell them what they should and shouldn't believe – ALWAYS after I've quoted Scripture, by the way – we could start a heck of a building project here at St. Mark's. We – WE, the CHURCH! – who are supposed to be setting an example for the world, have used the world as our example. Our culture has told us to jump, and we've come to the culture on bended knee, pleading, “How high?”

Don't talk about poverty, pastor – it might offend the rich. Don't talk about the rich – it might give the poor ideas! Don't talk about health care – that's a private issue, pastor.

Don't talk about living together before marriage – everyone's doing it, pastor, who are you to tell us what we can and can't do? Don't talk about the problem of homosexuality pastor – by the way, if I even so much as MENTIONED that homosexuality was a sin back home in Canada, I could be thrown in prison for a hate crime.

Abortion? Oh, don't talk about killing children – it might offend someone. Never mind that it will cost my wife and I \$30,000 to adopt a child, and we have to go to RUSSIA – because it's easier for Americans and Canadians to kill their children than give them away.

III. We Must Lose Our Lives

Then, there's the Christ of God. In the midst of all this decay he still – still!- calls out to his people. Jesus still calls us to daily “take up our cross.” Jesus calls us to make carrying that cross behind him our sole objective. What a miracle that he simply refuses to give up on us, that he refuses to give up on a people he created to live in peace in his presence. If we were Baptists, I'd call for an AMEN!

It's for a nation of people such as us that Christ “**suffered many things,**” that he was “**killed and on the third day raised to life.**” Christ does not call us to do anything he has not already done. Do you think if you speak out against immorality and injustice you'll be mocked? Talk to the cross. Do you think if you tell your neighbors that Jesus is the Christ of God, they might think you're crazy? Talk to the cross.

ILLUS: A story is told of a man who complained bitterly to the Lord that his cross was too heavy to pick up every day. In a dream he found himself before the Lord, who told him he could go into the next room and pick out a difference cross for himself. He saw huge towering crosses thousands of feet high – the cross of cancer, the cross of AIDS, the cross of poverty, the cross of persecution for the sake of Christ. Then, laying in the corner, he saw a four foot balsam cross. Thinking he'd found a bargain, he told the Lord, “I'll take that one.” The Lord smiled and said, “That's the one you had when you came to me the first time.”

IV. Only Then Can We Win the Victory

The Christ of God asks us to believe the unbelievable – that only by losing our lives for him and in him, and carrying our crosses daily, will we save our lives. My dear Christian friends, we are to be a parade of cross-carrying people, cheerfully following after our Savior, knowing that if we do, his victory will be ours, knowing that victory comes at a price. If carrying our cross daily is our sole objective, we will win outright victory. Against immorality? More than that. Against injustice? More than that. Will we win a better USA? Far, far, far better even than that. We will share in Christ's resurrection. We will share in his victory over death, and in his eternal life. By faith the blood that was shed on the cross of Calvary will save us from this veil of tears and despair.

At the end of the war of Independence, the United States won a greater degree of freedom from tyranny. But the Declaration of Independence couldn't promise us eternal life. The Constitution has no article guaranteeing freedom from death. Those who gave up their lives for the idea of the United States died. Those who throw their life at the feet of Christ's cross will never die – they belong to Christ, are clothed with Christ, and are heirs of his promises.

Let's not be weary in carrying our cross. The hour is late – the time is short – and night is coming. If anyone would follow Christ, let him take up his cross. Let him deny himself. Let him lose his life for Christ's sake – for whoever does so, will surely save it for all eternity.

Amen.