Proper 17 August 30, 2020

Mathew 16:21-28

Losing Is Living

What do we mean by “living”? When we meet people and want to get to know them better, do we not ask, “What do you do for a living?” We of course mean their occupation, but is that really their living? Is not a “living” something profoundly more substantial than the way they make their money? Is that really living?

Christ came to save lives by losing his. And even more, Christ has come into a dying, broken world to save it. But our idea of saving lives is usually quite different from what Jesus had in mind. Verses 21-22 reveal the heart of sinful man, as Peter’s words to our lord deny that Jesus should ever die on a cross.

The George S. Patton approach makes a lot of sense to us: “Nobody ever won a war by dying for his country. You win a war by making the other poor guy die for his country.” This is the world’s idea of wining.

Saving a whole world full of lives would surely usually involve a great deal of money, powerful armies, and important people, but Jesus has something completely different in mind. His words to Peter in verse 23 serve to define the stark difference between the heart of man and the heart of God, as Jesus rebukes Peter for thinking like Satan. “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hinderance to me. For you are not setting you mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.”

Jesus has something completely different in mind. The greatest and most holy act of all time – Jesus’ sacrificial death – will look to us like a terrible travesty of justice, a dark day. But Jesus’ death on the cross would turn the world upside down. He looked weak, but he was victorious. He looked like a loser, but became our Savior. For me, then, as well, losing has become winning, dying has become living, and all the measures that the world would apply to me don’t work anymore.

Christ continues to work this way through us. Having saved the world by his death, Jesus now uses his people to be part of his holy work in the losing of their lives. Verses 24-25 instruct us that a life lived in the name of Jesus is saved, but a life lived in one’s own name is already lost.

Today martyrs are being made in places of persecution around the world. But so to in this place, countless Christians are giving their lives one moment at a time, one act of love, one Sunday lesson taught, one word of forgiveness at a time, and right now, one phone call inquiring about the well being of a friend or loved one, providing a meal dropped at one’s door step, ensuring their safety as well as you own, and wearing masks, not just because you are told to, but out of love, love for neighbour and through that, love for Jesus. Every minute, every day, every hour spent in any such activity is one less we have left for our selfish and worldly selves. We are losing part of our lives, dying to this life.

Jesus today redefines our life with his own on the cross. Now that we have been redeemed by Jesus’ great sacrifice, we bear it mark. The cross inscribed on our heads and hearts in Baptism has become the very signature of our lives. It is in this reality that we not be surprised if we suffer for, or are asked to sacrifice for our faith. This is what it means to be followers of Christ. The world of course thinks we are mad, and we ourselves may find this hard to understand, but Jesus makes a promise: ***this is his way***. He does things this way, not Satan’s way of power and glory, but humbly, servant-like, with a cross, and what looks like losing. He turns the losing into winning in Easter glory and resurrection joy. Consider how the resurrected Jesus brought that reality to his disciples in the Pentecost appearance of Jesus in the flesh. The victory, out of what they thought was losing, manifest in what they could see and touch.

So, when we are asked what we do for a living, how do we answer? We might just answer: I am a Christian. My living is dying for Jesus, my gain is giving, and my victory is losing. If you say that at the office Christmas party next December, you might find someone sidling away from you as fast as they can, but its the truth, and Christ does say that in dying, even the dying of embarrassment, he is giving life. All though we might never say this at a cocktail party, it is non the less true: As Christians.

God defines our very lives today. He bought them with a significant price. It is his right. But this is also a very good thing. For God defines our lives with his own salvation act. We are not the people of angelic glory or mighty heroes of some pagan mythology. Jesus has invited us to take up a cross and follow him, the cross on which the salvation of the world was won. It is not an easy thing to be, but it is the highest and holiest and best thing to be.

We are people for whom the Lord of Life has laid down his life. We are the people of the greatest gift ever given. Defined by his great sacrifice for us, we proclaim his death. Sometimes we even use words to do so. For His cross is emblazoned on us.