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“Are You Winning or Losing?” **Sermon on Mark 8:27-38**

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“Choose this day whom you will serve, but as for me and my house we will serve the Lord”. Joshua said those words a long time ago. But what does it mean for us to serve the Lord? A Lord who, in this chaotic culture, is often difficult to see or find. And if you can’t see or find, who then is the Lord? We are about to find out.

Mark 8:27-38

²⁷ Jesus went on with his disciples to the villages of Caesarea Philippi; and on the way he asked his disciples, “Who do people say that I am?” ²⁸ And they answered him, “John the Baptist; and others, Elijah; and still others, one of the prophets.” ²⁹ He asked them, “But who do you say that I am?” Peter answered him, “You are the Messiah.” ³⁰ And he sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.

³¹ Then he began to teach them that the Son of Man must undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again. ³² He said all this quite openly. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. ³³ But turning and looking at his disciples, he rebuked Peter and said, “Get behind me, Satan! For you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

³⁴ He called the crowd with his disciples, and said to them, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. ³⁵ For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it. ³⁶ For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life? ³⁷ Indeed, what can they give in return for their life? ³⁸ Those who are ashamed of me and of my words in this adulterous and sinful generation, of them the Son of Man will also be ashamed when he comes in the glory of his Father with the holy angels.”

“Who do people say that I am?”

When it comes to who Jesus is, people often have different understandings as to his identity. The Church of Christ parishioner sees Jesus differently than the AME parishioner, who sees Jesus differently from the California evangelical, who sees Jesus differently from the New England congregationalist, who sees Jesus differently than, say, a congregant of Westminster Presbyterian Church.

So, who’s right? Well, many of the greatest scholars in the world agree with me when I say, “We are.”

There are lots of different answers to who Jesus is: some say John the Baptist, some say Elijah, some say one of the prophets. But there’s only one winning answer, and Peter has it. “You are the Messiah.” Ding, ding, ding! We have a winner.

But this is Mark’s Gospel. In Matthew’s Gospel, Peter gets a prize from Jesus for the correct answer, “Blessed are you Peter...”. In Mark’s Gospel, Jesus has a stern response.

Jesus sternly ordered them to not tell anyone about him. Don’t tell a soul, which makes Jesus the most unusual Messiah in the history of messiahs. Because most messiahs can’t wait for you to tell folks that you found a messiah. Most messiahs send you envelopes in the mail, and when you open the envelope there’s another envelope asking for money to help fund the vision of the kingdom. Messiahs need people, lots of people, a supermajority of people. Because for a messiah, winning is everything.

There was once a saying, “It’s not whether you win or lose, but...” what? “...how you play the game.” Aside from some Vanderbilt football fans, who believes that? Winning is everything. Messiahs are born to win. Just ask the angels of Luke’s Gospel:

“And He shall reign forever and ever.
Forever and ever. Forever and ever.
Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah! Hallelujah!”

The Messiah lets the world know! We have a winner!

But, in Mark’s Gospel, Jesus sternly ordered them not to tell a soul! Why? I don’t know. Maybe he wants everyone to come to one’s own conclusion about his identity. No peer pressure. No coercion. Why did he say it?

Maybe the hardest thing about being a messiah is living into the name “Messiah.” Because everyone has a different need from a messiah. Throughout history, messiahs have a most difficult time living up to being a messiah. They start out great, but after a while, the polls diminish, and they forget, they don’t want, they reject. Ask that sad, sad, Cleopas on that road to Emmaus, who said to the stranger, “Oh, and we had so hoped that he was going to be the one to redeem Israel.” That’s what we wanted in the Messiah.

Jesus sternly, sternly, sternly ordered them to not tell a soul!

And then he said, "This is who I am. Son of Man must undergo great suffering." Loser.

"... and be rejected by the powers that be: the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes". Loser.

"... and be killed." Loser.

"Loser. Loser. Loser" That's all Peter could hear. He's following a loser, which makes him a loser. "Jesus you're wrong!" Can you imagine telling Jesus that he's wrong?

"If someone slaps you on the cheek, turn the other cheek." Can you imagine telling Jesus that he's wrong? "Love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you." Can you imagine telling Jesus that he's wrong? "Do not store up treasures on earth...". Can you imagine telling Jesus that he's wrong? Maybe we don't have to imagine. When we tell Jesus he's wrong, what we're doing is insisting that we are God over God.

Peter said, "Jesus you're wrong. You can't lose. We will lift up a cross, but it will be a cross of victory."

When I was being interviewed to be your pastor, I was surprised to see that the logo used on the website, bus, stationary, and Sanctuary floor was the Jerusalem cross. I was surprised because that cross was on the flag of the crusaders, that is to say, the armies of people who marched from Europe to Jerusalem to win some land for Jesus.

On July 15, 1099, the wall of Jerusalem was finally breached, and "for two days the Crusaders massacred the inhabitants and stormed the city." The Jerusalem cross. Winners they were for a while, because the first crusade was followed by the second crusade, which was followed by the third crusade, followed by the fourth, fifth, and sixth, and a few more after that, until they finally put that cross away.

There are many reasons why I love the Jerusalem cross. It has a sense of evangelism going out to the four corners of the world with a good word of love, grace, and hope. There are lots of reasons – but sometimes we need to put our own sin of how we use a cross – on a cross. Can a cross be a reminder of our sin? Christians throughout history have taken the cross and have distorted it for their own needs. Nazis twisted it into a swastika. The Ku Klux Klan burned it in the name of white purity. We will win!

Jesus said, "The Son of Man must undergo great suffering," Loser.

"...and be rejected by the powers that be: elders, the chief priests, and the scribes". Loser.

"...and be killed." Loser.

"Loser. Loser. Loser." That's all Peter could hear. He's following a loser, which made Peter a loser. "Jesus, you've got it all wrong! Winning is everything!"

“Get behind me Satan.” Jesus says it with passion, as if he’s been there before, as if he’s seen the tempter himself. As if he knows that the temptation of God is to be God. To live, and not die in that sacrifice. To be the everlasting God. To never let his life go out.

Jesus said, “If anyone wants to become my follower let them deny themselves, and take up their cross and follow me.” He doesn’t say “my cross.” He doesn’t need a hand with his cross.

Take up your cross.

What does it mean to take up your cross? Over the last couple of days I have watched the reports about 9/11 again. I didn’t want to, but I got sucked back in. The thing that stands out isn’t the fire, buildings crashing down, or the despicable hatred of life. I’m struck again and again by people who sacrifice, who look not to their own interest, but to the lives of others. I’m continually reminded of those firefighters walking up the steps, while others are coming down. I’m reminded by anyone who sticks out their hand and listens for a voice, and doesn’t care it is Republican, Democrat, masked, unmasked, white, black, or gay – whatever it is – I am here for you. Grab my hand! And if we get out, well and good. But if we die, we die together. And there it is - this moment of love that reverberates forever. Hallelujah!

Take up your cross!

It might be your anger at someone that eats at your soul. Let it go. It’s killing you. Crucify it. It might be the frustration you have because you can’t control a blessed thing in this world. Not anymore! Let it go. Crucify it. It might be the contempt you have for another because they don’t see the world as you see it. It’s not about winning. It may be about fear – your fear. And your fear that you may be losing.

“Son of Man must undergo great suffering.” Loser.

“...and be rejected by the powers that be: elders, the chief priests, and the scribes”. Loser.

“...and be killed.” Loser.

“Loser. Loser. Loser.” That’s all Peter could hear. He missed that Jesus said, “After three days I will be raised.” He missed that. He missed the life of Jesus. He missed the power of the resurrection. He missed it.

“Choose this day whom you will serve, but as for me and my house we will serve the Lord.”