

DATE: September 14, 2003

SUNDAY: Ordinary 24

SERMON: Finders, Weepers; Losers, Keepers

TEXTS: Mark 8:27-38

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We're all familiar, I'm sure, with that old childhood rhyme that we mostly used to torment our younger brothers or sisters when we found something that belonged to them and that they had lost: "Finders, keepers; losers, weepers," we'd chant at them, with the result that they would either start chasing us to get it back, or if that failed, they'd take their case to the ultimate authority—Mom.

So if you were thinking that perhaps I made a mistake when I put the title in the bulletin this week, I intentionally turned that old rhyme upside down, so there's no mistake, unless it's the mistake of trying to be too clever with titles.

That rhyme which we learned on the playground or back yard continues to be a motto for many in our world today, doesn't it? It's at the basis of nearly every exploitative situation you can think of. Why were Sierra Leone and Liberia plunged into a hell of violence and devastating civil war if not for the greed and arrogance of some political leaders and some large corporations who applied that childish rhyme to the diamonds those countries possess. "Finders, keepers; losers, weepers." And the result is clear isn't it? A very few keepers and great masses of weepers. It doesn't take too much imagination to see where that rhyme is at work in the struggles between Israelis and Palestinians also.

But we don't have to go so far from home nor do we need to look only at national or international affairs to find this philosophy of life at work. Something like it is at work in the whole issue of whether Maine is going to have casino gambling or not. You may have seen the article this past week that reported on the Maine Medical Association's unanimous opinion that casino gambling is likely to have a negative impact on public health, with projected increases in domestic violence, suicide, and addiction. We were living next door to Atlantic City back in the 70's when the first casino opened its doors, there, and I can tell you that there are precious few "Finders" and a great many "Losers." Job creation and the rejuvenation of Atlantic City, which was little more than a slum, were the promises that ultimately sold the public. Thirty years on, except for the narrow strip of oceanfront where the casinos are, Atlantic City is still a slum, and unemployment among many of the area's

residents is still high. And in the first week after the first casino opened, not only were there many "weepers" among the individuals who lost their shirts, so to speak, but the social service agencies such as the Salvation Army and others, were simply overwhelmed. "Finders, keepers; losers, weepers" is the way the world works; it always has.

Reversing that childhood rhyme seemed to me to be a succinct way of summing up what we hear Jesus saying in our gospel lesson today. *"If any want to come after me, they must deny themselves, and take up their crosses and follow me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake and the gospel's will save it."* Doesn't that sound like "Finders, weepers; losers, keepers" to you? It does to me. In fact, I'm tempted to say it sounds like nonsense, or at least like a zen koan that asks us to imagine the sound of one hand clapping. I understand that Jesus is stating a paradox here—attempting to save one's life results in losing it, while losing it results in saving it? But what does the paradox mean? Even more importantly, perhaps, what does it mean to me or to you? That's not so readily apparent, is it?

There is some readily apparent wisdom in the first part of Jesus' statement. This is the wisdom that says, the if you want to really live, you have to be willing to take risks. Hoarding life is like hoarding money under your mattress or in a shoebox in your closet; you get no use or profit from it. To really have life, you have to spend it, invest it, give of yourself freely. And if that's all Jesus meant, then we could all go home quite cheerfully and make a resolution to be a little bolder in seizing life's opportunities and live happily ever after.

But somehow, I don't think that Jesus was just cleverly stating that bit of worldly wisdom that anyone could understand if they only thought about it for a moment. No, there's something in this text that has the ring of a much deeper wisdom in it. There's a much more profound puzzle here than first appears. Jesus prefaces this paradoxical statement with a condition: *"If any want to come after me, let them deny themselves and take up their crosses and follow me."* Whatever else this paradox about saving life and losing it means, it is bound up with the matter of being Jesus' disciple and it involves carrying a cross. And the cross, when Jesus speaks of it, cannot mean the attractive brass or gold symbols we put on our church altars (or not, as the case may be) or wear around our necks as a piece of jewelry. (Was it Madonna who was the first celebrity to make wearing a cross around the neck such a fashion trend?) When Jesus

speaks of the cross, he is first of all speaking of his cross, the instrument of execution on which the Roman government hanged those whom it considered dangerous subversives and dissidents. Austin Farrer once said, "*When the worldly wise man tells us that it pays us to throw ourselves away, he intends that we should live to enjoy the payment. . . Worldly wisdom says, 'Take reasonable risks,' but Christ says, 'Come and be hanged'; and that is no sort of worldly wisdom. . . if a man is hanged, he is hanged.*" (Farrer, "Dying to Live," *Essential Sermons*, Cambridge, MA: Cowley Publications, 1991, 122.) To get the contemporary force of this, we might say, "If any want to come after me, let them pick up their electric chairs or their lethal injection gurneys, and follow me."

That is a very difficult concept for most of us to understand. It certainly is for me. I don't think it might be as difficult to understand for, say, the Chinese dissidents who have spent long years in "re-education" camps, being tortured or at least kept in conditions of severe deprivation for daring to seek greater civil liberties. Or for someone like theologian Dietrich Bonhoeffer in the late 1930's who could have stayed safely in this country where he was teaching at Union Seminary in New York, but went back to Germany to oppose Hitler, even though he knew very well, it could lead to his death, as in fact, it did. But I don't think I'm in any immediate danger of martyrdom at the hands of the government, the Patriot Act notwithstanding, and probably you aren't either, though there are certainly nations where martyrdom is a real and present danger. So if Jesus is advocating that his followers all give themselves over to martyrdom, then we can still all go home and not examine this statement any further.

Nor, do I think that we can take Jesus' invitation to pick up our crosses is simply a metaphor for bearing up courageously under certain circumstances. I've heard a fair number of wives say that about their husbands, "He's the cross I have to bear." If it only means he's a couch potato who prefers watching football to going to the symphony, it hardly rises to the measure of what Jesus is talking about. We have to be careful about trivializing the matter by thinking that all difficult or inconvenient circumstances are the crosses Jesus' followers are invited to carry. If that were true, then all of us here, without exception, would have to admit that crosses are relative things, and that some people's crosses are much lighter than others.

Sometimes, however, when circumstances are extremely difficult, as when someone is seriously disabled or chronically ill, the illness *may be* (not is

in every case, but *may be*) the cross that person is called to bear. It depends on what attitude or choices the person makes. When something extremely difficult or painful happens to us, something thrust upon us, as the cross was thrust upon Jesus, we have a choice as to whether we will try to make that situation as redemptive as possible, to accept it in the faith and hope that it may bring some ultimate good to others, as Jesus did, or whether we will simply either passively resign ourselves to it or worse, allow it to defeat us by becoming bitter and complaining.

Carol and I have a dear friend in her 80's who had a stroke about ten years ago that has left her almost completely disabled, virtually paralyzed on her right side, and completely dependent on privately paid helpers to help her get in and out of bed, help her get dressed, and in and out of her wheelchair. During these ten years, several of her helpers have quit, not because she was a difficult person or because they were lazy or found a better position somewhere else. Rather, she has so inspired them by her cheerfulness, and by her constant encouragement of them to make of themselves all that they can be, that they've left her service in order to go to college so they can achieve the potential she's convinced them that they have. Her choice of the way to deal with her situation is nothing like resignation, and it goes way beyond the cliché that if life hands you a lemon, make lemonade. Knowing her as we do, it has much more to do with seeing her life, in all its phases as having a redemptive purpose— to pick up others who are in danger of falling behind and give them the possibility of a new start.

Yet if this zen-like riddle that Jesus sets for us only applies only to martyrs or those who find a way to give meaning to their lives in difficult or painful circumstances, it's still not clear what, if anything, it means for the rest of us. It must mean something, because it exerts a claim on me that I can't escape. I listen to this statement and it skewers me. It hooks me. I can't shake free from it, and yet, I can't easily see what it means to me, either.

I suppose it might help to see what it means to the characters in St. Mark's story, since that's where we encounter it. Here are Jesus and his disciples traveling through the villages of Caesarea Philippi. While they are "on the way," a phrase that Mark uses very specifically to mean the path of discipleship, Jesus interrogates them. "*Who do others say that I am?*" he asks them. Well, that's an easily answered question. They've heard the mutterings and rumors of the crowds. "*Well, some*

*say you're Elijah or John the Baptist re-incarnated, or perhaps one of the prophets of the End Times."*

"*But who do you say that I am?*" comes back the next question. And somehow, when we read this, we sense that this question is not just a question to Jesus' disciples in the story, but somehow it has escaped the story, or perhaps it's we who are drawn down into the story, and we find ourselves under interrogation. Who do you say that I am? That's why this question and this incident is at the very center of Mark's gospel. It's the central question. It's the question the whole gospel was designed and written to raise and answer or rather, to force us and other readers to answer.

Peter answers for the other disciples and for the reader as well. It's a good answer, isn't it? "*You are the Messiah.*" All right, Peter! Finally you got it right. Finally it's all come together. Now we're getting somewhere! But where exactly is it that we are getting? Jesus doesn't seem to be terribly happy with Peter's answer. His response to this confession of Peter, says Mark, is, "*He sternly ordered them not to tell anyone about him.*" That's strange, isn't it? You'd think he'd want this insight of Peter's shouted from the housetops. Instead, he sternly enjoins silence.

Stranger still, is the next part. Immediately, he begins to tell his disciples that he is going up to Jerusalem, and there he will meet an untimely end. He will end up hanged on a cross as a dangerous subversive. But not to worry; after three days he will rise again. And he said all this very frankly and openly. Strange fate for the Messiah, isn't it?

His disciples evidently thought so too, for at once Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him. "Come on, Jesus. What on earth are you talking about, man? Look, do you want any disciples or not? If you keep talking like that, who's going to follow you? I mean we've all sacrificed a lot to come this far with you, and you've got to know that we didn't come along for the ride just to see you get crucified by the Romans and the rest of us probably getting the chop too. You're the Messiah. The Messiah is supposed to win. The Messiah is supposed to liberate us from the Romans. It's time for the revolution to begin. Time to head for the barricades. Enough of this defeatist talk." Can you imagine that Peter said something like that?

He must have said something like that, because Jesus turns on him, almost viciously, and says, "*Get behind me Satan! You're not on God's side, but on the world's side.*" Poor old Peter! He doesn't deserve this kind of treatment. To be called Satan by the man he's left home and family to follow. To be told he's on the side of the enemy rather than on

God's side. Yet this harsh rebuke is what Peter gets, and it is immediately after this strong rebuke to Peter that Jesus makes this paradoxical, puzzling statement about denying oneself and carrying a cross, about losing life through attempting to save it and finding life by losing it. "Losers, keepers; finders, weepers." So whatever it means, it has to be understood in the context of Peter's confession of Jesus as the Messiah and Jesus' subsequent challenge and rebuke to Peter.

At this point, I'm hearing this statement about saving and losing life as a political statement. Oh, I don't mean politics in the sense of Democrats and Republicans. I mean it's political in the sense that it's about power and relationships. It's about one's commitments and loyalties. It's about the way things get done in this world. It's about what road we choose to travel. It's about whose will, ultimately, is being done and how.

The world's politics says that the way you get things done is to assert your will, be aggressive, wield power to accomplish what you want to accomplish, make deals. If other people get in your way, too bad for them. Chairman Mao stated it most graphically when he said, "Power grows out of the barrel of a gun." That's pretty plain speaking, isn't it. And history is a long story of the exercise of that kind of political power. Human will asserting itself over other human wills and circumstances to make things happen.

Jesus, however, also speaks plainly, and he says, "*Those who want to be my disciples must give up their own wills, and pick up their crosses, and follow me.*"

Now I begin to get a glimmer of light. Just a glimmer, but I think, in that glimmer, I see a new way of living, a new way of relating to other people, a new way of doing business, a new way of wielding power— not the power that shoots out the barrel of a gun or from asserting my invincible will to make things happen in the way I want them to. Rather, it is the power that comes from willingly serving the interests of others ahead of my own, even when to do so is costly. It is not the power of self-interested and aggressive demands, but the power of self-giving love. It is not the power of manipulation or force in order to ensure the future turns out the way we want it to, but the power of an unflinching trust in God's future. So I don't have to burn myself up in the rat race to make myself a success as the world defines success. I can give up the need I have to control others by manipulating them to my will. I can lay down my life for Christ's sake and the gospel's. In short, I can wield the power of self-giving love, a love that I see writ

large in that hanged man on the cross, a love that he himself puts within me by his spirit, and which I experience in the community of other women and men who are “on the way”– the way that leads, yes, to the cross, but beyond the cross to resurrection.

It’s no accident that St. Mark immediately follows this invitation to take up the cross with the story of Jesus’ transfiguration in a blaze of glory which poor old Peter and a few others are privileged to witness. That’s the point, you see. Unless you shoulder your cross, you don’t get to see the vision of the glory of God, shining in the face of Jesus Christ. To follow Christ is to choose to walk the road of servanthood, of self-giving, of laying down one’s life in order to find a life that is deeper and richer and eternal and shot through with glory.

Oh, I’ll grant you, that if we do what this puzzle, this riddle, this bit of inspired nonsense calls us to do– surrender our own wills to follow the will of God even though it leads to the cross– it will give us moments of doubt when we feel only the weight and pain of the cross and forget the bit about the resurrection from the dead. When we let our fears obscure our faith, in other words. But when we remember, when we trust in God’s ultimate triumph over death as Jesus trusted, when we dare to love as fully as Jesus loved, when we dare to let go of our own life and, by faith, let it be hanged up there on Christ’s cross with him, then let the world laugh. We will have found the only life that’s worth living, and that promises even more abundant life yet to come. We too will see the glory of God.