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Pentecost 26 – Christ the King - November 26, 2023

“The Winners and Losers”

Read: Matthew 25: 31 - 46 and/or Memorize: Matthew 25: 40

Pastor Brett Blair tells the story about a man who had been driving all night. When the morning came, he still had far to go. He decided he needed to get some sleep. He stopped in the very next city, found a city park and pulled into a parking spot, so he could get an hour or two of sleep.

It just so happened he had chosen a quiet place on a very popular jogging route. Just as he started to doze off, there was a knock on his window. He woke up, “Yes,” he said. “Excuse me, sir,” the jogger said, “do you have the time?” The man looked at his watch and answered, “8:15.” The jogger said thanks and left.

The man settled down again, and just as he was dozing off, there was another knock on the window. Another jogger wanted to know the time. “Excuse me, sir, do you have the time?” “8:25” the man replied. The jogger said thanks and went on his way.

The man could see other joggers passing by. He knew it was only a matter of time before another one asked for the time. Quickly, he got out a pen and paper and wrote, “I do not know the time,” put it on the window and thought that he solved his problem.

As he was just dozing off, there was yet another knock at the window. He lowered his window. The jogger said, “Sir,” wanting to be helpful, “it’s 8:45.” Sometimes, no matter how hard you try, you can’t win. It is true of everybody and everything at some time or another.

We even have a term for it, “Murphy’s Law: if anything can go wrong, it will.” Anybody know the corollary to Murphy’s Law? “If anything can’t go wrong, it will anyway.” Every field has its own version of Murphy’s Law. Someone made a list of Murphy’s Laws on computers. Here are just a few:

As soon as you delete a file you no longer need, you’ll need it. You can’t win them all, but you sure can lose them all. The likelihood of a hard drive crash is in direct proportion to the value of the material that hasn’t been backed up. And finally, anything can be made to work if you fiddle with it. If you fiddle with something long enough, you’ll break it.

Of course, some people have more than their share of bad luck. Typically, when we find somebody like that, we have a label for them. We label them “losers.” I doubt there is any sadder label in the world than that. If you’re thinking maybe you’re a loser today, I have some good news for you. You’re not, at least not in God’s eyes. As Christian’s we are to think closely before we label anyone as a loser.

David Barber, a Lutheran pastor tells a fascinating story about a man who bore the label of loser. The focus of the article was centered on the historian who had written a book about people he called, “America’s Born Losers.”

In his research the author came across an institution in the nineteenth century called The Mercantile Agency. This agency employed informants to file reports on the credit worthiness of their neighbors. According to the author, it was like a “national bureau of standards for judging winners and losers.”

One such report was filed on a man named William Henry Brisbane. Brisbane was operating a business in Cincinnati in the 1840’s. An informant for the Mercantile Agency reported that Brisbane had failed at every occupation he had ever tried, including farming, publishing and even practicing medicine. The report predicted he would likely fail for the rest of his life.

The biggest evidence for this conclusion was that this “loser” had inherited \$100,000, which was a huge fortune in that day. Apparently, Brisbane had spent most of his \$100,000 in a very short time like many lottery winners do. So, Brisbane went down as a loser in their opinion.

However, the author of “Born Losers” poked around a little bit and had the rest of the story to tell. Actually, William Brisbane had been a successful South Carolina plantation owner. Ahead of his time, he decided that slavery was wrong. As a result, he sold his plantation and moved north, leaving his slaves behind. He felt guilty about doing that.

So, he used the \$100,000 he inherited to buy his slaves back; then set them free. The Mercantile Agency may have labeled him a loser. I suspect, that God would label Brisbane as an extraordinary winner as would his freed slaves.

Think about that story for a moment in the light of today’s Gospel. Jesus says that when He returns with His Kingdom there will be some clear losers, in fact they will lose everything worth having. There will also be some clear winners, people who will have it all, but it won’t be according to how we often view them.

You probably know this pretty well. “When the Son of Man comes in all His glory and all the angels with Him, He will sit on His glorious throne. All the nations will be gathered before Him, and He will separate the people one from another as a shepherd separates the sheep from the goats. He will have the sheep on his right and the goats on his left.”

Remember, I said there would be some clear winners, but they’re winners for a different reason than we think of winning. They had found their sufficiency in Jesus, and followed His example. Here's how Jesus described description: “For I was hungry and you gave me something to eat, I was thirsty and you gave me something to drink, I was a stranger and you invited me in, I needed clothes and you clothed me, I was sick and you looked after me, I was in prison and you came to visit me.” When they failed, their turned to Him for their needed grace. The winners in the Kingdom of God are those who care for others.

The winners are surprised. They don’t remember any of this, which is just as Jesus wants it. That care for others is part of their life, rather than a plan to earn heaven. They care for the least without the prompting that this is required. They acted as Jesus says His followers should act.

Here's the powerful message of Christ the King. Then He will say to those on the left, “Depart from me, into the eternal fire prepared for the devil and his angels . . .” They didn’t find their sufficiency in Jesus, but relied on self. They were unrighteous because they would only help if they recognized the person as important, becoming losers because of their short-sightedness. They had failed to see Jesus in all those in need around them and therefore lost it all.

Perhaps we need to rethink our priorities in the light of that. We might start right here: what does it mean to have it all? Remember Jesus never said there is anything wrong with being wealthy. Wealth is measured differently in the Kingdom of God. It is not how much you have, but how you use it to serve Jesus.

Perhaps this story from an e-magazine called Help 4 Sunday might help us to understand. A minister named Max worked with street people in Ft. Lauderdale, FL. Max became friends with Archie. Archie had severe gout in each foot and could barely walk. Each day he sold the Ft. Lauderdale paper on the sidewalk.

Selling the newspaper is his livelihood. Whether he’s feeling bad, sick, tired, or rain or shine, Archie sells those papers. He lives in a little one room apartment that rents by the day. He depends on the sale of each day’s paper to pay the rent, buy his food and provide utilities.

One day Max met Archie and noticed that Archie had an excited look on his face. He could hardly contain himself. He told Max that he just had to come and see his

apartment. He had something to show him. Max was hesitant to go down into this darkened area of Archie's apartment but he also knew that he must.

They arrived at the apartment. Archie said that each day he had been saving money. He threw open the door, held out his arms and said, "Look!" And there in this little dingy, one room apartment was a sofa ripped and torn with all the stuffing coming out of it, but Archie was proud because it belonged to him.

He also owed a little black and white TV. It didn't have rabbit ears but a bent coat hanger and there was a recliner chair. All belonged to Archie. It was evident that Archie had saved a long time to have anything "this nice." Archie looked at Max with a smile on his face and said, "I have all I need now." Can you imagine that?

Suddenly, Max noticed that there, stretched out in the recliner was a big old guy, a friend of Archie's. Max recognized him as another street person. Archie hadn't mentioned him, but as big as he was, it was hard not to notice him. "Archie, what's he doing here?" Max asked.

And here's what Archie said: "He needed a place to stay. Now that I have all I need, don't you think I should share with someone else?" Do you hear that, "Now that I have all that I need, don't you think I should share with others?"

If you follow Jesus, you don't have to wait until you have all your need to share, for He provides all to share. There's no way you could ever be a loser, if you live like Him. It's not that you plan out your help to others, but let it flow out of your life in Christ. Archie was a winner in the Kingdom of God because he had learned to care for others.

Jesus came to announce who the winners and losers were. He judged them differently than people thought. He had made it clear that everything we thought of winning, was going to be turned on its head. Those who think they are winners will be losers and those who are seen as losers will be winners, if they follow Jesus. It's because winners understand that God's plan for the world is what you learned in Sunday School: loving and sharing, looking out for the weak and the less fortunate is what makes you a winner in the Kingdom of God.

Count me in: How are you preparing now for God's intended future for you?