

## ALL SAINTS DAY – 11/4/18

### *Blessed Are The Losers*

(Luke 6:20-31)

“Winning isn’t everything,” the late Vince Lombardi is reported to have once said, “it’s the *only* thing.” And even though the legendary Green Bay Packer’s football coach later claimed that he was misquoted, that what he *really* said was, “The *will* to win is the only thing,” the phrase nevertheless stuck. Not only that, but it quickly resonated with many Americans and soon found a permanent place in our national consciousness that endures to this very day. According to this way of thinking, there are basically only two kinds of people in the world: Winners and Losers. That is, those who know only success in life, and those who only know failure.

We’re constantly reminded, of course, that the U.S. was *founded* by winners. That we have achieved our greatness and superpower status in the world only through the *efforts* of winners. And this coming Tuesday, on Election Day, we will cast our votes for those whom we *believe* are winners. And will work to help *keep* America winning.

So imagine my surprise this past week when, as I was studying today’s scripture readings, I suddenly discovered that Jesus apparently got it all wrong! Who’d a thunk, right?

You see, I was watching TV one evening and show after show and commercial after commercial, informed me – in no uncertain terms no less – that Jesus was clearly mistaken in today’s Gospel.

- Blessed are those who are *rich*, I was informed, not *poor*; that is, those who can afford that new Lexus luxury sedan or that multi-

million dollar vacation getaway down in the Caribbean, as featured on House Hunters International.

- Blessed are those who can afford to eat at one of those 5-star restaurants and rub elbows with famous chefs like Gordon Ramsey, and celebrity diners like the Kardashian clan or the Real Housewives of New York.
- And blessed are those who appear perpetually happy; who seemingly don't have a care in the world; who never have to worry about affordable health care, or paying the rent, or putting food on the table, or covering their kids tuition, or having enough money to retire on.
- And, of course, blessed are those who are universally admired; who have their own reality TV shows, tens of thousands of Twitter followers, and who the paparazzi flock to photograph.

In short, blessed are the *winner*s... those one-percenters who have achieved the kind of success and wealth and influence that the rest of us cannot even *begin* to imagine...

And, then, in sharp contrast, of course, we have the *loser*s... all those hundreds of millions of people around the globe, billions in fact, who don't measure up; who barely survive from day to day; who are a drag on the rest of us because of their seemingly never-ending unmet needs; who live short, ugly, pain-filled lives of suffering and abject poverty; who have the *audacity* to try and find a better life here in the United States, whether legally or illegally; and who – most of all – the rest of us find so easy to ignore and dismiss, and – what's more – so easy to write off by automatically blaming them for all of their own suffering and sadness. After all, it's *their* problem, not *ours*...

Winners and losers... Jesus *must love* winners, right? It's pretty obvious; a no brainer one would think. How can he not?

Don't they, the winners, deserve *his* love and attention in the same exact way that they have received *ours*? Haven't they *earned it* by becoming the captains of industry and the ruling elite; the movers and shakers of society? Don't their lives of privilege and power and wealth simply *demand it*?

...In a nutshell, NO! What Jesus *actually* said, and it must have been on more than one occasion as well, since Matthew and Luke *both* recorded it. And it must have shocked people back then about as much as it still shocks us today if we take it at face value, that is. What Jesus actually said was this: "Blessed are the *losers*..." The losers! In other words, the poor, the hungry, the persecuted, and all those who are driven to tears by the overwhelming burdens of pain and sadness in their lives.

Just like the Apostle Paul, who once wrote to the Corinthians, "I will show you a still more excellent way," Jesus flips all of our expectations completely upside down. He turns our preconceived notions of winners and losers inside out. And he leaves us struggling to understand, to comprehend, a completely different view of reality; a *kingdom* reality. And to consider a completely different set of values... In short, blessed are the *losers*, said Jesus.

And so what then of the winners? Those who seemingly never fail or fall short? Those who only know the way of unbroken, unbridled success? Those uber successful people we so admire and envy? *Woe* to them, says Jesus.

Whoa indeed! Jesus, in effect, says to them: Hold on there, folks. Wait just a second. You're going to be in for a big surprise. Why? Because what you now enjoy; in other words, all the wonderful things you have achieved and have accumulated in this life; well, that's about as good as it's gonna get for you. You see, you've already *received* your reward and your share of good things, he tells them. In *this* life, that is. But in the great reversal that is going to occur in the life to come you are going to be sorely disappointed, says Jesus. Just as surely as all the apparent *losers* of this world will, one day, be rewarded.

You see, this winning thing? It's really not all that it's cracked up to be. For many reasons. But mostly because when winning becomes an obsession, when it becomes not everything but the *only* thing, then pretty soon people will begin to cut corners; pretty soon the end begins to justify the means; pretty soon it becomes winning at any and all costs; and pretty soon... people will begin to totally ignore the needs of others in favor of their own. And *pretty soon* we will have totally lost track of what living in this world, as a child of God, is all about.

And this notion didn't even start with Jesus, mind you. As we heard, the prophet Micah, in our first reading, asks if God even *desires* the tokens of our great success and wealth. Will God somehow be impressed if we shower the Lord with the fruits of our winning ways?

Once again, the answer is: NO. On the other hand, "What *does* the Lord require of you?" asks the prophet. It's pretty simple really: Do justice. Love kindness. And walk humbly with your God. Not at all the typical path to greatness and winning that we're accustomed to, is it?

As baseball manager, Leo Durocher, once observed, “Nice guys finish last.” Actually, that could very well be the mantra of our “winning is the only thing” society. Nice people who strive for justice, who treat others with kindness, and whose walk through life is marked by humility are not likely to achieve, much less *succeed*, in our no holds barred, winner take all, survival of the fittest, society.

Then, in similar fashion, our second reading this morning observes, “Consider your own call, brothers and sisters, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth.” Rather God chose what is foolish, weak and despised *instead*. Why? So that no one might boast in the presence of God, writes Paul.

Walk humbly with God. Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord. There’s more than a few of us in our society who perhaps need to be reminded of this. As someone once pointed out, we have a choice of either humbling *ourselves* or *being* humbled.

A famous Olympic athlete, whose home was filled with gold medals and world championship trophies, and who was accustomed to fans recognizing him instantly and fawning over him, once made a public appearance at a retirement facility. When he first arrived, however, the main hallway was deserted, except for one elderly woman in a wheelchair. He immediately walked up to her and got her attention with a cheery, “Good morning!” Then he asked her, “Ma’am, do you know who I am?”

She looked at him with her pale blue eyes that instantly twinkled in recognition. And then in her most patient voice, she responded, “No... But if you go to the front desk, someone there will tell you.”

Walk humbly with your God, and let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.

And returning now to our Gospel this morning, it's this lesson about winners who are really losers, and losers who are really winners, that reminds us that in the upside-down, topsy-turvy, counter-intuitive, reality that we call the Kingdom of God, what you *see* is definitely not what you *get*. Because what we currently see in the world around us is decidedly *not* what we will see and experience in the life and in the world to come, according to Jesus.

Of course, Jesus doesn't stop here, though, does he? He goes on: "Love you enemies..." Huh? Say that again?

"Love your enemies, do good to those who hate you, bless those who curse you, pray for those who abuse you..." Say what?

We live in a world, in a society, in a culture, that prefers instead to get *even* with our enemies, not *love* them. To retaliate against those who hate us. To *curse* those who curse us, and quickly return the favor to those who abuse us.

If anyone strikes you on the cheek, then strike them back *harder*, is the prevailing wisdom of our day, isn't it? No, make that *ten times* harder.

And if someone takes from you, take back *double* from them, and see to it that they're punished for it as well. Tell those who beg from you to go get a job, and stop being such a "taker." Most of all, do unto others whatever you need to do in order to further your *own* interests and

pursuits – even if it's at *their* expense. Remember, it's all about *winning*...

“Uh uh,” says Jesus. Not in my world. Not in my kingdom. We play by *different* rules in God's kingdom.

Corrie Ten Boom, in her book *Reflections of God's Glory*, once wrote about a man in Africa who had come to a church meeting with bandaged hands. “I asked him how he had been injured,” she writes. He said, “My neighbor's straw roof was on fire. I helped him put it out and that's how my hands were burned.”

Later on she learned the *whole* story. It seems that his neighbor *hated* this man, and had even gone so far as to set the man's roof on fire while his wife and children were asleep in their hut. They were in great danger. But, fortunately, he was able to put out the fire in time.

*However*, not before sparks flew over to the roof of the hateful neighbor next door who had set the fire in the first place! And, now, his *own* house started to burn. “But there was no hate in the heart of this Christian,” wrote Ten Boom. “There was (only) love for his enemy, and he did everything he could to put out the fire in his neighbor's house. And that's how his *own* hands were burned.”

You see, when it comes right down to it, it's not really about winners and losers at all. Winning and losing are often determined by the slimmest of margins. Winning and losing are often the consequence of good fortune, of being in the right or wrong place at the right or wrong time. Winning and losing are not the endpoints or our final destinations, as one scholar has written. Instead, they are artificial and logically flawed concepts. In the end, it's not about winning and losing at all.

In the end, it's simply about living as best we can, as Jesus *taught* us to live, as Jesus *himself* lived; by loving our enemies, doing good to those who hate us, blessing those who curse us, and praying for those who hurt us. It's about treating others with the very same respect, the very same thoughtfulness and consideration, the very same degree of love and concern that we would hope to receive ourselves...

John Wesley, the founder of the movement that eventually became the Methodist Church, once described the life of faith in this way: "Do all the good you can, by all the means you can, in all the ways you can, in all the places you can, at all the times you can, to all the people you can, and for as long as you can."

And Martin Luther once said, "Good works do not make a man good. But a good man *does* good works."

Back in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, New York City had one of the most hotly contested mayor's races in its history. The incumbent mayor and his political machine were corrupt to the core, and represented politics at its very worst.

But there were a number of concerned citizens who decided that they were fed up with this kind of politics and decided to *fight* city hall. In the beginning they even seemed to be making a difference. But as the campaign dragged on, as they so often do, the commitment of time and energy required to make any lasting change became more than most people were willing to give. Many of these good people, who initially believed in the importance of what they were doing, began to drop out.



And so, when the election was finally over, and the votes were all counted, the corrupt mayor – unfortunately – had been reelected. The next day, the New York Times ran an editorial analyzing what had happened. The article summed up the situation with these words: “The good people quit being good before the bad people quit being bad.”

Jesus calls us to *be* good and to *do* good. That’s what sets us apart. That’s what identifies us as the people of God. It’s not about winning and losing, it’s *never* about winning and losing, despite what some people may say. It’s about loving your neighbor as yourself. Plain and simple.

Amen.