



SERMONS THAT WORK

**Pentecost 21
Proper 24 (B)**

Winners and Losers

[RCL] Job 38:1-7, (34-41); Psalm 104:1-9, 25, 37b; Hebrews 5:1-10; Mark 10:35-45

In the rough and tumble world of the schoolyard, one of the most frequent insults kids hurl at each other is “loser.” As in, Joey so-and-so is a loser, or your big brother is a loser. And, as we all know, these insults sting. They sting because it seems like kids, like all of us, would rather win than lose. As the old saying goes, “Show me a good loser and I’ll show you a loser.”

It’s also the logic of bullies of all ages. Ridicule the apparently weak and vulnerable. Stigmatize them. Tell others not to waste their time hanging out with losers, but rather to join the bullies in their sham fellowship of supposed victory and viciousness.

That message lives on beyond the playground. Something inside us likes to be associated with success. Successful people intrigue us. We study the secrets of highly successful people. We like our sports teams better when they are winning. In the world of politics, it’s also thought important to back a winner. Maybe if we are close to successful people, some of their success will rub off on us. If our political candidate wins, who knows, maybe she will remember us when she gets into power. Maybe a nice contract will come our way. Maybe our company will get a nice tax break. Who knows, if we play our cards right, we might get appointed to be an ambassador or a cabinet member.

It seems like human beings are always trying to move up on the scale of importance. On the playground, we sang about being “king of the castle”; in our adult years we aspire to “upward mobility.” As Carlyle Marney put it, Americans are addicted to “salvation by succeeding.” After all, who really remembers the runners-up or the fellow who came in fourth and didn’t make it onto the podium?

Somehow, we think, if we are successful, if we are winners, then we will be fulfilled, then we will be valuable, then we will be important, then we will be powerful. Unfortunately, religious folks have been no exception to this rule. Church history often reads like the painful saga of craven leaders choosing power over love, institutional success over sacrifice, control over the cross. There seems to be something inside human beings that wants to exercise power by lording it over others, even in the church. And if we can get some power by hanging on to the coattails of someone on the way up, so be it.

In our Gospel lesson for today, we hear the story of James and John, two of Jesus' disciples, who thought they were backing a winner. They had been following Jesus since he came on the scene in Galilee. They had seen Jesus say and do extraordinary things. They had heard him preaching about the coming of the Kingdom of God, and they left everything to follow him. They decided to stake their whole lives on the mission of Jesus. And they were betting that, when God's Kingdom came, Jesus was going to be a winner.

So, one day, James and John come to Jesus with a request. And, as you may have noticed, they approach him in a rather peculiar way. They say to him, "Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask." There is something fishy going on here. It sounds like a couple of kids trying to get away with something. Sounds like children going to their mother and saying, "I want you to promise to do whatever we ask you to do before we tell you what it is. You've got to promise first. You've got to swear you'll do it." Ever hear one like this before? Hear a request like this and you know something is up.

Apparently, Jesus knew this too. Notice that he does not make any promises. Neither does he scold them – something he is quite capable of doing at other times. Rather, he cuts through the baloney, cuts through the game playing, and asks, "What is it that you want me to do for you?" Just get to the point, boys, what do you want? And there is grace here: grace in cutting through the bunk, grace in getting to the point, and grace in his making himself available to his followers, even his rather fishy followers.

So, James and John finally spit it out and say, "Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory." And there it is for all to see. The naked ambition of James and John. They see Jesus as destined for glory, and for them, that means destined for power. They see Jesus as a powerful ruler, maybe someone who is going to crack some heads and take back power from the Romans. They picture Jesus as a powerful King, seated upon a throne of glory, with his attendants seated beside him, one on his left and one on his right. These seats on the left and the right are also places of great power, and they are asking Jesus to promise that when he becomes a powerful king that he will remember them and give them a couple of choice positions in his court. They see Jesus as destined to be a winner, someone on the way up in the world, and they are hoping that he will bring them along for the ride and give them a couple positions of power and prestige in the Kingdom.

And after all, don't James and John have some reason for expecting a little payback? Didn't they give up everything to follow Jesus? Didn't they leave family and profession to follow him? Why wouldn't they expect a little something in return on the day when their guy comes out on top? They were counting on their guy to be a winner after all, and this promised to be their own ticket to the top.

But James and John just did not get it. Jesus tells them, "You do not know what you are asking. Are you able to drink the cup I drink, or be baptized with the baptism that I am baptized with?" Basically, Jesus is saying that his disciples do not have a clue as to who he is or what his whole mission is about. Jesus did not come to crack heads and take back power. He was not destined to be a powerful ruler the way earthly rulers are powerful. Rather, the cup he drinks is the cup of suffering, the cup of his blood poured out for others. The baptism with which he is baptized is his passion and death. Basically, Jesus' cup and baptism

point to the cross, and because the cross is the only earthly throne he will ever occupy, he doubts James and John really know what they are asking when they request to be on his left hand and his right hand. After all, who will be on Jesus' left and right when he was on the cross? Do James and John really want to be on his left and his right when he comes into glory?

This is not about following the king to his castle, but to his cross. This is not upward mobility. It is downward mobility. This is not backing a winner. By the standards of the world, James and John are hanging out with a loser. But Christ is showing his disciples that true greatness is not found in climbing to the top and exercising power over others. Rather, true greatness, true leadership is found in self-emptying, self-giving love. Unlike worldly rulers who lord it over others, Jesus tells his disciples, "Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all. For the Son of Man came not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many."

This is basically the Gospel in a nutshell, and the spelling out of what the good news of the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ means for his disciples. It is still shocking, or at least it ought to be. It's rather easy to point out how Jesus' vision of true greatness found in self-emptying love clashes with the lifestyles of Armani-clad businessmen with slicked-back hair and glad-handing politicians building up their war chests. But in our gospel lesson, Jesus seems less interested in simply criticizing the ways of worldly rulers and more concerned with the ways in which his followers are aping the behavior of worldly rulers and trying to lord it over one another in the community of his followers. It's less about the failures of the world and more about the corruption of the body of Christ. And that means the sting of Jesus' words and the shock of recognition must begin with the prelates, the priests, and all the people in the community of disciples who are called to take up their crosses and follow Jesus. Trying to lord it over one another, blaming one another for the decline in membership and influence of our churches, shaming the losers, and scrambling for the remaining seats of power are not to be so among us. Rather, we are called to follow the one who came *not to be served but to serve, and to give his life a ransom for many*.

We pray, *Almighty God, whose most dear Son went not up to joy but first he suffered pain, and entered not into glory before he was crucified: Mercifully grant that we, walking in the way of the cross, may find it none other than the way of life and peace; through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen (BCP, p. 99).*

The Rev. Joseph S. Pagano is an Episcopal priest who serves in the Anglican Parish of Pasadena and Cormack in Newfoundland, Canada. He is a faculty member in theology at Queen's College in St. John's, Newfoundland. His most recent book is *Common Prayer: Reflections on Episcopal Worship*.