

## “Love Song for Losers”

There are passages of scripture that we like, and there are passages of scripture that are important. Sometimes they’re the same, sometimes not. Like it or not, there is no more important passage in the New Testament than our lesson for today.

It is the turning point of Mark’s Gospel.<sup>1</sup> Prior to this Jesus has been conducting his ministry of exorcism and healing and veiled teaching through mysterious parables<sup>2</sup>. In words and in deeds he has been announcing his central message that the Kingdom of God has come near. He is proclaiming the good news<sup>3</sup> that the rule of God is “at hand” and challenging people to change their lives: to believe this good news and to begin to live as though God were truly in charge.

Repeatedly Jesus deflects the focus from himself, making no reference to his special role as God’s chosen and referring to himself as the “Son of Man” in the third person.

But at this crucial point near the center of the Gospel the unspoken issue suddenly looms: who *is* Jesus? Jesus himself raises it with his disciples: “Who do people say that I am?” Some think he’s the prophet Elijah, returned to usher in the end time; some think he’s John the Baptist returned from the dead; others think he’s a prophet. Then Jesus asks the crucial question: “Who do *you* say that I am?” Peter blurts it out: “You are the Messiah!”

So when we read it in context, today’s lesson is nothing less than a conversation—and a heated one at that—regarding what it means to be the Messiah, and therefore what it means to be a follower of Jesus Christ. The word “Christ” is simply the Greek word for “Messiah”.

Jesus is very explicit about what it means: no parables this time. Being the Messiah means that Jesus will suffer. He will be rejected by the authorities. He will be killed and will rise again after three days. He connects all the dots to draw a clear picture that Peter finds completely unacceptable.

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<sup>1</sup> Abraham Malherbe, my New Testament professor at Yale Divinity School, liked to call this passage the “watershed” of Mark’s Gospel: a good image.

<sup>2</sup> Jesus even says he employs parables specifically so that outsiders will *not* understand. See Mark 4:10-13.

<sup>3</sup> The Greek word is *euangellion*, which we translate as “gospel”.

Peter takes him aside. Can you imagine the pupil taking his Rabbi by the arm and walking off with him to straighten him out? It's a shocking image. We don't know what Peter said in "rebuking" Jesus, but we do know what many people thought a Messiah was supposed to be. The word means "anointed one," as kings were anointed. The Messiah would be the king to restore the glories of Israel, to throw off the Roman occupiers and return the golden age of King David. That's precisely the sort of thing the crowd in Jerusalem will be clamoring for on Palm Sunday.

The Messiah is a winner. Jesus is talking like a loser.

This difference in perspective is so important that we get the next teaching on two levels, a dual message. First Jesus turns around to be certain that all the disciples, all his inner circle, will hear what he is about to say to Peter. Then he puts Peter in his place. He rebukes Peter and says, "Get behind me," the rightful place for a disciple; and then he calls him "Satan". Satan is the tempter who accuses the faithful before God. Satan's game is entrapment: offer the temptation and prosecute the case all in one fell swoop. And what is the temptation Peter puts before Jesus? It is the temptation to seek the kingdom and the power and the glory on worldly terms; to oppose the Romans by feeding his own inner Pontius Pilate—and we're all got one in here.

But that is the way humans think. Jesus has come to teach and embody the Reign of God by emptying himself as a humble servant. So he turns now from addressing the inner circle to speak to the crowds who are following him and by extension to us, as well. "If *any*<sup>4</sup> want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me. 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."

It is altogether likely that this talk about taking up a cross was very literal for the community of early Christians to whom Mark wrote his gospel, a community undergoing persecution for their Christian faith, a community to whom the truth about Jesus the Messiah seemed to be hidden from the world. Jesus had been crucified for opposing the religious and political establishment; a similar fate could await his followers. They were called not to betray their faith in order to save their hides, but to give their lives to Christ and so find true and eternal life.

But the teaching has a much wider application, as well. To deny yourself doesn't mean to hate yourself or to punish yourself. It means to

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<sup>4</sup> Emphasis added.

remove yourself from the center of the universe. If you can't surrender your life—if you can't let go of what tells you who you are—your true self is lost; you'll never find it. But to let go of the externals which define us—to lose our lives for the sake of the good news of the gospel—that's what it means to find life that is full and meaningful, true, abundant and eternal. Clinging to what you have makes you a loser; for what you have can't give you real life.

For some people this passage works as a sudden, dramatic reorientation. When our life is a total mess, we turn that life over to God. We give it all up for Jesus because it's so clear it isn't working; and Jesus gives us back a life that nothing can take away. Often this entails renouncing some terribly self-destructive behavior, surrendering an addiction or obsession that has moved to the center of our lives and taken over that place where God belongs. We can make a God of drugs or alcohol or gambling or whatever. Losing that sort of life constitutes a clear and obvious improvement, even though it is difficult to let go of *anything* when we don't know what will take its place.

We've all heard the testimony of those who have suddenly and dramatically found—or been found by—Christ. They almost make it seem as though you have to have a train wreck before you can get on the right track.

But doesn't that almost make it too easy? Is it so hard to give up something that clearly isn't working? Isn't it harder to let go of something that seems *almost* to be working; some formula that seems *almost* to promise wholeness? The real issue here is who or what will be God? To what or to whom do we entrust the power to tell us who we are?

Here's where this sermon risks getting out of control and becoming not a sermon, but a book, with chapters about so many of the things we put at the center of our lives, entrusting to them the power to define us and so presumably to save us. Some people live their whole lives seeking the approval of their parents to make them whole. Some people live their whole lives through their children, seeking their appreciation or charting their achievements. For many of us the job tells us who we are—or aren't—because thinking we're somebody because of what we do or nobody because of what we do is the same wrong idea. Some people invest themselves entirely in their religion, as opposed to God. For some people it's a cause or ideology or institution. For some people it's a hobby, or the arts, or their favorite sports team... or their body: I'm somebody because I have a great body; I'm nobody because I have a lousy body.

It's not that these things are bad; most of them are good as interests or activities or enthusiasms. But they're lousy substitutes for God. Anything to which we give the power to tell us who we are is taking the place of God.

To many of us, that power resides to a frightening degree with things. It's an issue that is difficult to approach directly; but George Carlin made fun of this in a particularly helpful way when he riffed on the subject of stuff. He begins by saying that he was late getting out on stage because he was trying to find a place to put his stuff; that all we really need in life is a place for our stuff; that, when you think about it, that's all a house is: a place to put our stuff. A house is just a pile of stuff with a lid on it; we can see this whenever we take off in a plane: there's a pile of stuff, there's a pile of stuff, there's a great big pile of stuff. A house is where we keep all our stuff while we go away and get more stuff. And we always lock it up when we go so that nobody comes in and takes our stuff... 'cause they always take the good stuff. Whenever we go away on vacation, we take along two big suitcases of stuff... sort of a mini version of our house. And we're always anxious until we unpack and surround ourselves with our stuff.<sup>5</sup>

It's funny to think of ourselves as so wrapped up in our stuff that we're anxious when we don't have our stuff all around us. But what makes this funny is not the absurdity of it but the semi-plausibility. We laugh with recognition.

One thing I know for certain: the more stuff we have the more we devote to preserving it, protecting it, arranging it, dusting it, moving it around, comparing it to what we see in ads and in other people's houses. Aaron got a laugh a couple weeks ago talking about the upcoming PlymYouth Garage Sale. There's a great opportunity to get rid of some of the stuff that makes us feel the need for a bigger place. And then we'll have room for more stuff!

But it stops being funny when we realize that our need for all this stuff ruins the planet and prevents others from having enough to live. Because so often it's not just about having stuff; it's about allowing stuff to tell us who we are, and so we relate to nothing else in its proper perspective.

That's why stewardship—generosity—matters: not just so that we can give our stuff to worthy causes, but so that by intentionally parting with a

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<sup>5</sup> The whole routine, including of course a bunch of language unsuitable for church (this *is* George Carlin, after all) can be found in video version on YouTube. In CD form it is found on the *A Place For My Stuff* album.

significant percentage of it we can keep stuff in its place: get thee behind me, stuff!

When we hear this teaching from Jesus we can get so focused on what we give up, what we lose. But when we give up trying to save our own life by putting something unworthy at the center, we are free to receive the life that God gives when we let God be God and so allow everything else its proper place. This passage is a love song for losers!

Imagine the freedom to be experienced when we can just let stuff be stuff. Let cars be cars, clothes be clothes and houses be houses... and not some statement to the world regarding our achievement, importance or status.

Imagine the freedom to let parents be parents—as flawed and human as they are—and not somebody who’s supposed to make my life whole, or somebody whose affirmation and understanding mean everything to me.

Or imagine the freedom to let kids be kids: whose approval is nice but not essential to the validation of my being; whose success and achievements are not primarily reflections about me; whose happiness and independence are what matter most.

It’s the same for jobs and hobbies and interests and enthusiasms: great in their place, but not as the integrating principle for a life. When God is God, stuff can be stuff and we can be human.

“For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and for the gospel will save it.”

Amen

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