

Dear members and friends of St. John Lutheran,

*"[Jesus said], 'If anyone would come after Me, he must deny himself and take up his cross and follow Me. For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for Me and for the gospel will save it'"* Mark 8:34,35

**Have you ever noticed how preoccupied we are with winning?** The words "win" and "winning" get a workout in our vocabulary. We win games, friends, and arguments. We have winning smiles and winning personalities. A famous football coach, who was immortalized for winning several championships, once said, "Winning isn't everything, it's the **only** thing!"

In the world's eyes, winning is associated with happiness, joy and contentment. The world assumes that winning is good and losing is bad, and that winners are happy and losers are sad. Winning has its place. I am not suggesting otherwise. But, we run into problems when we try to take the "winning-is-everything" attitude into the church. Many try. Not only does it not work, it can have fatal consequences for one's faith.

**The picture these misguided people paint of Christianity** is something like this: for the true Christian, life is paradise. When you come to Christ, your problems turn into opportunities, heartaches turn into joys, bad times fade away. Your career soars to new heights. Suddenly, all the right people admire you. No one says anything unkind to you. Temptations flee. Money is no longer a problem. As God's special person, He spares you from pain, problems, and poverty. I think you get the picture. The correct response to this line of thinking is: No - a thousand times no! It is not only hogwash, it is heresy! If that is Christianity, then you and I must be wondering whether we are really Christians!

Yes, Jesus brings us many blessings, but the evil one does not roll over and play dead when we follow Christ. Instead, the devil continues to dog us every day of our lives. The world that we live in looks for winners, and when it finds a Christian that is willing to give sacrificially to someone who is hurting, who refuses to work on Sunday, or when they refuse to go along with the notion that stealing from the government or big business is acceptable, the real Christian finds himself on the outside of society, looking in. Turns out, Christianity is counter-cultural. It goes against the flow of society. Winners look out for "number one." Losers are too weak or stupid to do so. It reminds me of school children, years ago, when they used to make an "L" with their right index finger and thumb, while saying, "loser!"

In our verse for the month, **Jesus is saying that winning means losing. And, that what the world considers losing is really winning.**

We must be willing to turn our lives over to God for His use, that is, to lose our lives for Christ's sake. Then, we can share the Good News of life in Christ with others. Yes, to win life with God, we must be willing to put ourselves second. To win life with God we must be willing to lose our selfishness. To win life with God we must be willing to carry the cross of Christ as a banner proclaiming forgiveness from sin, death, and the evil one. **For a Christian, winning means losing. And, what the world considers losing means winning.**

Denying self, as Jesus is asking us to do, will not be easy. It's often hard and painful. Christ suffered, His followers suffered, we, too, will have the privilege of suffering. Trying to live a moral life in a society that is very permissive causes suffering. It is painful for the young woman who spends lonely nights at home because she has moral standards. The ethical businessman is not always the richest one. Blowing the whistle on excesses has been rewarded with unemployment checks for many.

As Christ encourages us to do what is right rather than what is convenient, others often look at us and shake their heads. But for us to do less is to march to a different drum beat than the one Jesus sounds. Now, of course, our suffering does not - and cannot - earn us anything. Christ's suffering earned salvation for us already. There's nothing more that we can do. The nature of discipleship is voluntary. By the grace of God and the power of the Holy Spirit, we take up our cross **voluntarily**, because Christ did it first.

Losing means winning. Losing our selfishness for Christ's sake means winning the crown of life. Our march through life does not end at the grave. No, that is when the best stuff starts. God blew the lid off a borrowed grave as His Son threw death aside, filled His lungs again, and put heaven in faith's grasp. That same resurrection power - power that brought a man out of death - is available to us. You already possess it. So do I. We received it in Holy Baptism. We have been united with Christ. That resurrection power is available to us through the Gospel and the Sacraments.

**As we prepare for the coming Easter season, may we commit ourselves to being in worship regularly**, so that by the power of the Holy Spirit, we may be recreated, remade, and empowered today, every day, so that whether we are winners or losers in the world's eyes, we are spiritually strong.

May we lean on Christ. By His Spirit's power, may we deny ourselves, carry His cross and withstand suffering for the Gospel's sake.

Pastor Travis