

Church of the Good Shepherd
and
St. John the Evangelist

6 Epiphany
February 12, 2006
Fr. Bill McGinty

“Sometimes when you lose, you win!”

Last week we had an interesting conversation at coffee hour, about people’s political persuasion. We more or less decided that none of us were all conservative or all liberal. Most of us are a mix and probably, middle of the road on a whole host of issues. Janine Vernon thought that I was a ‘con-lib’, that is a conservative masquerading as a liberal. There probably is a lot of truth in that, for the only time I took an interest in politics was back in the sixties when it was fashionable to be liberal.

This conversation had me thinking later in the week, about Ted Turner. We tend to think of Ted, as the archetypal conservative and capitalist. Last year there was a whole one hour interview with him on national television. I began to watch it, determined to hate him. He lived up to his billing of being loud, opinionated, assertive and at times outrageous. To my surprise however, I also found him to be knowledgeable, interesting, refreshingly honest and fascinating.

Right at the end of the interview, the interviewer asked him this question: “Is it true that you once said: ‘Christianity is a religion for losers?’” The statement was so shocking that it seemed to hang there in the air like a speech balloon in a comic. “Yes, I did say that”, he replied, but he went on to mitigate it somewhat.

I remember how that phrase stayed with me for days, after I heard it. “Christianity is a religion for losers!” I wondered whether it fitted in with our American attitude to winning and sports. We have prosperity for caring only about winning to the exclusion of everything else. The Super bowl being an example or the Yankees, if they don’t win the World Series then the season is a failure. As I thought about it more, I began to agree with Ted that ‘Christianity is a religion for losers.’ Maybe Ted didn’t mean it the same way I do, but Jesus seemed to spend more time with losers than anybody else, and it’s something that comes out in today’s readings.

In the Gospel, Jesus cures a leper. To understand the significance of this story you have to comprehend and know the Jewish attitude to sickness and leprosy in particular. Leprosy was feared because no one knew its cause and it had no cure. Lepers were two time losers, because not only did they have the worst debilitating disease on the planet, but they lost their place within the community. No longer could they live within the village and they lost their place in the synagogue and could no longer attend the temple. More than that, Lepers could not sit and eat at table with family or community. The only others who this applied to, were outlaws and criminals. In a sense Jews regarded lepers as the same, because they believed leprosy was a punishment for sin. For God to allow you to suffer such a grievous affliction, must mean that your sins were equally grievous.

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Jesus does not simply heal the leper, but in so doing he reaches out and touches him. Not only does Jesus make him whole again, but he returns him to his place in the community. At a stroke Jesus has turned all the philosophy of his own people on its head.

The loser has somehow come out on top, not by anything that he has achieved or accomplished himself, but by the grace of Christ's salvation. This paradox "that the last will be first and the first will be last", runs all the way through the New Testament and the teaching of Jesus. We just do not hear or see the church or its leaders emphasizing it too much. When we see Christians, colleges, schools and institutions accruing millions and millions of dollars in endowments, fees and tuition, we wonder which Gospel they have been reading, or hospitals run by churches that many people cannot afford.

Ask yourself this question: "If Jesus came a second time, which church, political party or group would he belong to?"

The answer is easy to find. All we need do is re-read the New Testament. Jesus was the man who rejected the political parties of his day and hung out with losers. He spent time with the blind, the lame, the crazy and the lepers. He hung out with tax collectors, prostitutes, fishermen who couldn't catch fish and an assortment of lonely women, people searching for meaning, and poor people who could barely feed themselves. If hanging out with losers is an indication, then "Jesus was a loser."

So if Jesus did come a second time the Republican Party may well be the Pharisees, and those liberal minded Democrats would doubtlessly be the Sadducees in Jesus' mind. Nor do I think for one moment that Jesus would care to be adorned with a scarlet robe, like any of the leaders of our churches. If the second coming of our savior was true to form then the Christ would be poor, homeless, African and female. And the only people likely to listen to her teaching would be a bunch of losers who no one cares about because they have no say, influence or political clout.

What are the odds that this bunch of losers could come out on top and turn this old world and its values upside down despite the fact they have no church or political party? Statistics tell us, it cannot happen.

Yet 2000 years ago twelve losers, one dead prophet and a bunch of women with a Sunday morning comeback story turned the Roman Empire upside down. If CNN had been around Ted would have had to cover the story and admit. "Sometimes when you lose you win!"

This is our legacy as Christians and followers of Jesus that we are disciples of a man, who sacrifices his life that others, may live. St Paul in his letter to the Corinthians today tells us that we are after a greater prize than a mere wreath of victory. To the world we are of course, deluded and losers. Naaman, the Persian army commander, learns a lesson in the 1st reading from the 2nd book of King. It is that God has a plan and that plan is no respecter of position or power. The story of Naaman prefigures the story of Jesus, that to God all things are possible.

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In 1963 J. A. T. Robinson the Anglican Bishop of Woolwich came out with his now celebrated book "Honest to God." In that book Robinson told us that God is not up there or even out there, but that the real God dwells in our hearts and in our spirits. In a sense, he is right, our lives are short, our planet will one day go out of existence, our bodies will return to the dust of the Universe. There will come a time when there will be no record that we ever existed. Even the stones will not survive.

Rather than trying to depress us, Robinson was saying: "only things of the Spirit will survive. Only love, goodness, grace and virtue will live on. Empires, wealth and power will be as meaningless as a snowflake in a furnace." Is this what Jesus meant when he said: "Store up treasures for yourself in heaven where no moth can consume nor thief break in to steal it. For where your true treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Our minds have been flooded this week with thoughts of Franklyn. He wants so much to go home to his treasure, because he knows that she is waiting there for him on the other side. Look around today and tell me where your treasure is, where does your heart lie? For today Jesus is telling us: if you finish the race for wealth, power and importance, but come last, it will not matter. For the greater race is to give love, understanding and forgiveness away, in losing to yourself you will win an eternity among those you truly treasure.

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Amen+

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