

Losers Win!

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UMC Geneva IL

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Alyce McKenzie in her blog on today's Gospel lesson tells a good news/bad news joke about a small commuter plane with 5 passengers aboard that suddenly experienced engine failure. (1)

--Immediately the pilot emerged from the cock pit with a parachute strapped on his back. He announced to the group: Folks, there is bad news and there is good news. The bad news is the plane's going down, and there's nothing more I can do. The good news is that there are several parachute packs by the wall back there. The bad news is that there are four of them and five of you. But good luck. And thanks for choosing our airline...With a thumbs up, the pilot leaps from the plane.

-Immediately, a woman jumps out of her seat announcing, "I'm one of the most prominent brain surgeons in the Midwest. My patients need me." She grabs a parachute, straps it on her back and leaps out.

-Then a lawyer jumps up saying, "I'm a partner in a huge law firm, and the office would fall apart without me." He grabs a pack, straps it on and leaps out.

-Next, another man jumps up shouting, "I am likely the smartest man in the world. My IQ is off the charts. I *need* a parachute!" He grabs one and leaps out of the plane.

-That leaves two people on the plane with one parachute . An older pastor and a teenage boy. "Son," the pastor says, "you take the last parachute. You're young and have your whole life ahead of you. God bless you and have a safe landing." The teenager just grinned at the man. "Thanks, pastor, but there are still two parachutes left. The smartest man in the world just grabbed my school backpack!"

In a sense, we all find ourselves in midair, clinging to something! Today, Jesus comes along and gives us something to cling to. Admittedly it's strange, downright counter cultural, and definitely paradoxical. He says, "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake and the

gospel will save it!” Jesus’ example and teaching fly straight in the face of his culture’s values...and ours. Our culture pressures us to believe that the most important thing in life that will bring us joy and happiness is looking out for #1...looking out for ourselves and instant gratification.

Alyce McKenzie notes that this makes us “clingy.” “We cling for dear life to other people, money, possessions, addictions, our looks, our youthfulness, the neighborhood we live in, the prestige of our job, or how well our children are doing in school, in sports and life. Both of our arms are occupied – clinging to our lives, and we don’t have an arm free to reach out to anyone else.”

Mark 8 happens to be half-way through the 16 chapters of Mark’s Gospel. And it serves as a hinge, a turning point in Mark’s story of Jesus. Prior to this, Jesus has been ministering in the region of Galilee, north of Jerusalem. In chapter 8, however, Jesus turns and sets his face resolutely on his journey to Jerusalem...the cross...and death. Peter wants no part of this! Neither do the other disciples. You see, they’ve read it wrong up to this point. They believed that Jesus’s popularity, his healings and feedings, his teaching and preaching that drew huge crowds...well, they believed it was all about power...and prestige...and glory. But in today’s passage Jesus sets Peter, the disciples – and us – straight!

Having said that, it is important to state that self-denial and cross bearing aren’t about suffering and unhappiness as ends in themselves, as being intrinsically good. Nor does self-denial offer us, as Pastor David Lose puts it, “a doormat theology where we are encouraged to ignore our genuine human needs altogether or see ourselves as not deserving of love, dignity and respect. Furthermore, there’s certainly no justification here for enduring abusive relationships and tolerating injustice.” (2) That’s not what we’re talking about. What Jesus’ teaching and example are all about, however, is the fact that giving in love includes sacrifice, denying ourselves and our immediate gratification in order to meet another’s needs.

Parents have no problem understanding this! And neither should we. In fact I’d like you to ponder moments from your past when you offered self-giving, sacrificial love. Was there a time when you stopped in the midst of a busy day to help someone, a stranger, in need? Can you recall a time when you refused to be a bystander and ended up taking a courageous stand for someone else? Like

standing up for school mate who was being bullied? Or someone at work who was being maligned? Or someone who was being excluded or shamed because of the color of their skin, their gender or sexual orientation? Think of times you've given sacrificially to God through our church and our partners in ministry who are continuing Jesus' work for peace and justice, helping the poor and homeless, feeding the hungry and healing the sick. Think of times when you've given sacrificially of your time...your talents...and your treasure to help others and to make our world a better place. That's what I'm talking about! That's what Jesus is talking about here!

Following Jesus is for losers! In his Beloved Community, losers win! The question is – what are we willing to lose? Individually and as a church? Individuals and churches that are focused inwardly on themselves; always playing it safe with their time, talent and treasures; always looking out for themselves - bent on “saving their lives” - will surely lose them.

I must say, I am so pleased that our Church Council just approved a motion from our Missions Committee. The motion read that “the leaders of UMCG feel it is important to put our faith into action by committing ourselves to sacrificial giving. We recognize that this spiritual practice of trusting God to provide is not easy. In our humanness, we are inclined to operate out of fear and caution, to look out for ourselves first and only give of our surplus when it is safe. Yet, is this not completely opposite of how Jesus lived and instructed his disciples to love, including us? So, with joy and gratitude, acknowledging that we are a connectional community, we will challenge ourselves to give from our “first fruits” and encourage each family to do the same in 2021. Let's see what exciting ways God will work in and through us as we live out our faith in this very tangible way.”

Truth be told, when we stop worrying and obsessing about our own wants, and turn our focus instead to the needs of others around us, we will find what we've been searching for all along: Great joy. A deep sense of purpose. And a wonderful feeling of authenticity – of being the people God intends for us to be. And that's the paradox of following Jesus! In losing our lives we gain them. It's the truth! Jesus's Truth! **Losers win!** Amen.

(1) Alyce McKenzie, *Patheos*, September 10, 2012.

(2) David Lose, *Dear Partner in Preaching*, February 23, 2015.