
What a Bunch of Losers!

A sermon by Dean Sam Candler

Proper 19 – Year C

“Which one of you, having a hundred sheep and losing one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the wilderness and go after the one that is lost until he finds it? ... Or what woman having ten silver coins, if she loses one of them, does not light a lamp, sweep the house, and search carefully until she finds it?” —Luke 15:4, 8

What a bunch of losers.

Do any of you remember the 2006 movie, “Little Miss Sunshine?” It’s a black comedy, and often a rude and vulgar one; but it sounds some deep chords of truth about our human condition.

Little Miss Sunshine is a little girl named Olive, who, according to glossy Hollywood standards, is not a particularly attractive or even a particularly talented little girl. But she is determined to enter and to win a beauty pageant in California. The family has little money, and they are so wildly dysfunctional that no one can be left home alone; so they make the 800-mile trip to California crammed into an old Volkswagen van. Along the way, everything goes wrong.

Olive’s goofy father, Richard, is an aspiring motivational coach. For him, everything is positive, and he drives that point hard to the young Olive. At one point, little Olive is in tears, talking to her grandfather. “Grandpa?” she asks. “Yeah,” he replies. “I don’t wanna be a loser.” The grandpa replies, “You’re not a loser. Where’d you get the idea you’re a loser?” And then Olive breaks down in tears. “Because,” she says, “Daddy hates losers.”

Daddy hates losers.

Whether we are talented or not, beautiful or not, accomplished or not, most of us have heard those sad lines before. Daddy hates losers. Mommy hates losers. Our coach hates losers. Our world hates losers. Whatever you do, whatever you are, don’t be a loser!

During the recent Olympics in Brazil, there were eight sprinters lined up across eight lanes. Seven of them always lost. Seven of the best athletes in the world were losers. There are thirty major league baseball teams this year, but only one will win the World Series. Twenty-nine of those teams will be losers.

There is no question, that when the United States was attacked on 9/11, fifteen years ago today, we lost something. We felt like losers. When a United States soldier is captured and held prisoner, I imagine he felt like a loser.

Daddy hates losers. What an insidious and poisonous statement! Because every single one of us has been a loser. Don’t let ignorant leaders and stupid pundits lie to you. Every single one of us has lost something, at some time, in life. Every single one of us is loser.

The parables of Jesus that we have just heard this morning, from the Gospel of Luke, chapter fifteen, are all about losing things. One time a shepherd with a hundred sheep lost one of them. A woman with ten silver coins lost one of them. A prodigal man with two sons lost one of them. What a bunch of losers.

There are lots of reasons I admire the parables of Jesus. Today, these parables remind us that the life of a normal human being involves losing things. There is no shame in such a condition. There is no shame. We lose things in life. We lose people in life. We are losers. It is part of the Christian life to realize loss, and it is part of the Christian discipline to acknowledge loss.

Loss. Jesus gets along much better in his ministry with those who have recognized loss in their lives. He eats with sinners and tax collectors. He seeks out those who have lost position in life, those who have lost status, those who have lost.

In the Bible, the people who grumble about Jesus—for instance, the Pharisees and scribes—are generally those who are thought to have achieved all they wanted. They have not had to lose anything. They are not losers. Yes, the only people around Jesus who are *not* losers are the scribes and the Pharisees.

In fact, the way I read these parables, it looks like Jesus does not simply associate with losers. It looks like Jesus, in fact, is a loser. It looks like God, God himself, God herself, is also a loser.

I remember one of the plaintive songs sung by the old rock band, Emerson, Lake, and Palmer, a song that seems to have been sung against God, blaming God. They sang,

*Do you believe
God makes you breathe?
Why did he lose
Six million Jews?*

It's not just us who lose things. God loses people, too.

At the height of one of his more obnoxious stages in life, Ted Turner made headlines by claiming that Christianity is a religion for losers. The less obnoxious people around him later persuaded him to retract that statement, and he did. But he shouldn't have, because he was right. Christianity is for losers.

Christianity is for losers, because God is for losers. It is one of the most important things we have to learn about God. God is for losers. It doesn't matter how much you have, or think you have; if you don't know what you have lost, then you are not ready for God.

A shepherd had a hundred sheep. He wasn't poor. He had a lot of sheep. But he was concerned about the lost one. A woman had ten drachma. She wasn't poor. She had lots of money. But she lost a tenth of it. A man had two sons, and he wasn't poor. He had a son ready to inherit and lots of wealth. But he lost a son.

These parables of Jesus teach that all of us lose things. We lose things, and we lose people. It is sad. It is embarrassing. It makes us feel less than perfect. We get sick. We even die. It makes us feel less than perfect. It makes us feel like a loser.

And we are. But if we do not know how to lose, then we do not know how to rejoice either. Only those who know how to lose know also how to richly rejoice.

It may be that the older we get in life, the more things we lose. If so, then finding things is also a part of life, and a part of the Christian life. It is why we sing, "I once was lost, but now am found!"

The shepherd found his lost sheep. The woman found her silver coin. The father in the parable of the prodigal son lost a younger son, lost his property, and then it looks like he may have lost an older son. But he gets them back. And he gets them back with a grace that defies explanation.

I am a loser today. And so are you. However, no matter where we are lost today, no matter what we have lost, God is seeking us out. Not to reprimand or admonish us. There is no shame in being a loser. God is seeking us out, like the shepherd, like the woman, like the prodigal father, because God is *for* losers. Because God *loves*. Because God wants to *rejoice* with us.

Yes, Jesus talked a lot about losing things. And, then, even he was lost. But in Christ, lost things are found. In Christ, those who lose even their life, find it.

AMEN.

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