

*“From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised. And Peter took him aside and began to rebuke him, saying, “Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.” But he turned and said to Peter, “Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.” Then Jesus told his disciples, “If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul? For the Son of Man is going to come with his angels in the glory of his Father, and then he will repay each person according to what he has done. Truly, I say to you, there are some standing here who will not taste death until they see the Son of Man coming in his kingdom.””* (Matthew 16:21-28, ESV)

Dear Friends in Christ, and fellow redeemed:

“Winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing.” That quote from Henry Russell Sanders, former UCLA and Vanderbilt football coach was the pep talk given to his teams to encourage them to strive to be the best. But is that true? There is a body of research that shows that winning isn’t everything. And yet, that philosophy guides so much of our lives today. While we know that not everyone can win in a game, we don’t want to have anyone lose. At the school track meet, everyone gets a ribbon. Everyone’s a winner. We don’t want anyone to lose.

Or a school district establishes a “no-F policy”. No student is to fail, because that would be psychologically hard on the student. It has happened that a teacher was fired by her school district for failing students who refused to hand in their work. It was more important to the school that everyone be a winner, because winning is everything.

In contrast to this, Jesus tells us that losing is everything! What the world sees as important; what so many see as the very reason for existence is nothing compared to what God has prepared for His people. The way to glory is not the worldly standard of winning, but rather the surrender of everything to the will of God, that we may find the blessings of all He has prepared for us in Christ, our Saviour.

The world think that winning is everything and everyone loves a winner. Even the disciples felt that way. To get an appreciation for the paradox of our text, we should look back a bit in the gospel of Matthew to see the things that have been happening. Jesus has been on a winning streak. He is growing in popularity. He fed the multitude of 5,000 men, not counting the women and children, with only five small loaves of bread and two fish. This miracle was a powerful, if misguided, source of Jesus’ popularity and people wanted to make Him king as a result. Then Jesus walks on the water and the disciples worship Him, saying: *“Truly you are the Son of God.”* (Matthew 14:33, ESV) Matthew adds the many miracles that Jesus performed, and how the crowds marvelled at Him. There is another miraculous feeding of 4,000, and it all comes together as Jesus asks the disciples, *“who do you say that I am?”* (Matthew 16:15, ESV) Peter boldly and confidently asserts the truth that God the Holy Spirit has made known to him and to his fellow disciples: *“You are the Christ, the Son of the living God.”* (Matthew 16:16, ESV)

Peter’s great confession of faith is the foundation on which the Church of God is established. Jesus even declares: *“on this rock I will build my church, and the gates of hell shall not prevail against it.”* (Matthew 16:18, ESV) Sounds like another win, doesn’t it? It must have been about this time that Thomas led the disciples in singing that as a victorious marching tune: *Stand up, stand up for Jesus, Ye soldiers of the cross. Lift high His royal banner; It must not suffer loss. From vict’ry unto vict’ry His army He shall lead Till ev’ry foe is vanquished, And Christ is Lord indeed.* (LSB 660, st. 1) Victory after victory! Win after win! That’s what we want, Jesus. That’s what You will do. We can’t lose!

But now Jesus turns it all upside down. *“From that time Jesus began to show his disciples that he must go to Jerusalem and suffer many things from the elders and chief priests and scribes, and be killed, and on the third day be raised.”* Jesus knew what lay before Him. He has come to fulfill His Father’s will and to win the ultimate victory for us over sin, death and hell itself. But that victory does not come through a perfect season, with no losses. Rather, it will take what seems to be the greatest loss of all. If you are going to win, Jesus says, then I must lose. I must lose my life as I suffer for the sins of the world upon

the cross. I must set aside all my glory and victory and honour to win for you the forgiveness and life that can only come when losing is everything.

I suppose we can understand Peter's reaction. After all, Jesus had never lost a debate with the sly, devious Pharisees and Sadducees. The Lord has shown time and time again that He is the True God by His power over wind and wave, over all of nature, over every disease and even over death. The One who had confounded and overcome His enemies at every turn now says He is going to lose. He will suffer at the hands of His enemies. He will be killed. Yes, He will rise again. Somehow Peter missed that. The disciples all seemed to miss that last part. This isn't what they thought could happen to the Messiah. The Messiah was going to free them from their enemies. He was going to restore the glory of Israel as it was in the days of King David. The Christ, the Anointed One was supposed to bring victory, glory, and wealth to His people.

Peter thinks he is helping Jesus when he takes Him aside and says, "*Far be it from you, Lord! This shall never happen to you.*" Jesus very quickly puts Peter in his place. "*Get behind me, Satan! You are a hindrance to me. For you are not setting your mind on the things of God, but on the things of man.*" Jesus knows how our own plans and purposes can collide with God's perfect plans. It was God's will to send His Son to save the world from sin and death through Christ's death and resurrection. Peter's thoughts aren't on the will of God. They are on his own wants and desires. We know from other discussions among the disciples that they thought that Jesus would bring a great worldly kingdom, and that they would all have special places of honour in that kingdom. They weren't totally wrong; they just didn't think it all through. Jesus will establish an everlasting Kingdom. He will bring His people into a glory, a joy and a peace that we can only long to see in this world. Yes, the disciples will be honoured in that Kingdom. But if you want to win, Jesus says, then you have to know that losing is everything.

It is so easy to be caught up in winning and success that we lose sight of what really matters. We want freedom to 'do our own thing'. We want everyone to acknowledge that our ideas, opinions and views of truth—including in matters of faith—are what really matter. We strive for wealth and health and happiness. We want to be winners. Winning is everything.

Jesus says something very different: "*If anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it. For what will it profit a man if he gains the whole world and forfeits his soul? Or what shall a man give in return for his soul?*" Jeremiah complained that God had 'set him up', that the ministry to which God called him brought nothing but struggle and loss. He almost seems to ask, "If I'm proclaiming Your truth, shouldn't I win?" Yet God does promise His servant: "*And I will make you to this people a fortified wall of bronze; they will fight against you, but they shall not prevail over you, for I am with you to save you and deliver you, declares the LORD.*" (Jeremiah 15:20, ESV) You will find that even in your losing you will win, Jeremiah. Paul also turns us away from ourselves in the Epistle today. He tells us that we are to have a sincere love for others—a love not motivated by selfish desire or ambition, but a love that actively, joyfully and willingly seeks the good of others. It's not about our winning. It is about helping others to win. For us, losing is everything.

We struggle with self-denial. We don't think it's fair to have to set aside our own rights and privileges. We want it our way. We claim our rights. We claim our freedom. We claim our truth and ideals. God calls us to something better. He calls us to His way. He calls us to service; He calls us to surrender. He calls us from sin and death and the emptiness of worldly winning to the fulness and glory and marvel of life with Him forever. There is a bumper sticker that declares, "He who dies with the most toys wins". Really? What good will all those toys be once this life is ended? I like it when my team wins the Grey Cup or the Super Bowl or the Stanley Cup. But what does that mean when this world ends? When we live to win those things that belong only to this world, that is all we have. God has something better for us.

In our Baptism, our old self was crucified with Christ, so that we may live with Him in the new life He gives us. The old, selfish and sinful heart that wants only what it wants—that heart that thinks winning and having earthly satisfaction is what counts—has died. Yes, that old self clings to us and tries to overwhelm us. But in the power of the Holy Spirit we can deny ourselves. We can take up our cross and follow. We give up what doesn't matter, even if it seems that we are losing. We carry that cross that comes as we live for Christ here. That means servanthood. It means looking to the needs of others. It means trusting and clinging to Christ when the world turns against us. We do this, not because of what it brings to us, but we do it for Christ's sake—for the One who has done everything for us. What we give up and what we lose for Christ is never lost, for the Lord of heaven and earth turns it all upside down. Losing is everything, for all that is lost for Christ only brings the victory that is in Him alone. Amen.

