

Holy Cross Day, 2008

Gospel: John 12:20-33

Old Testament: Numbers 21:4-9

Epistle: 1 Corinthians 1:18-25

Title: Jesus- Winner or Loser?

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Everyone loves a winner. Whether it's an election, the Olympics or American Idol, we like to back winners. Being a winner has its perks. You get on TV, or on a box of Wheaties. There's money from endorsements. Fame and fortune. If you're a big winner, you'll need an entourage and bodyguards to protect you from the paparazzi and the crowds.

Jesus was becoming famous, and people were flocking to see him. He had just raised Lazarus from the dead, and that made people take notice. They thought they had found a winner, a Messiah, the next king of Israel. It was Passover time, and the city of Jerusalem was overflowing with visitors. When Jesus came into the city, the people shouted, "Hosanna, blessed is He who comes in the Name of the Lord, the King of Israel." The people thought they had found a winner, a Messiah, the next king of Israel.

Everyone wants to be connected with a winner. People live vicariously through movie stars, sports teams, or political candidates, and they are benefits to being friends with a winner. This is why winners draw a crowd.

For someone to win, someone else has to lose. This is what makes the Pharisees nervous. They were afraid that Jesus would win the hearts and minds of the people, and they would be the losers. This scares the Pharisees. In the verse that comes just before today's gospel, the Pharisees say "Look how the whole world has gone after Him."

And to prove the Pharisees' point, we are introduced to some Greeks who want to see Jesus. We aren't told why they want to see Jesus, but they're probably just curious. They want to know if the rumors that they've been hearing are true, and maybe they can get an autograph or an 8 by 10 glossy to take home with them. And so they approach Philip. They figure they need to go through the disciples, the bodyguards, the entourage. Philip, not sure of the protocol, checks with Andrew and together they go to see Jesus- check your schedule and see if you can squeeze them in.

Jesus' response is what the disciples have been waiting to hear, it's what the crowds have been waiting for, too- the pilgrims, the Greeks, the folks from Galilee- this is the big moment. "The hour has come for the Son of Man to be glorified." Alright! Glory time! Jesus is in His capital city. The crowds are there cheering Him on, it's time for Him to take His throne, to be crowned King. Everyone thinks that they've got a winner.

But Jesus' glory is not what the disciples expected, it's not what the crowds expected, and it's not what the Greeks expected. Jesus promises that His ministry will bear fruit, but first He has to die (and them, too). Jesus will be a winner. Jesus will be victorious over Sin, Death, and the Devil. But Jesus will win in a way that no one expects- through death on the cross.

To the rest of the world, Jesus looks like a loser. He died in one of the most painful, most disgraceful ways possible. Even though He had the support of the crowds, in five days He will be all alone, nailed to a cross.

If Jesus really were true God, certainly He would have saved Himself. Certainly He wouldn't have let things end this way. In the eyes of world, Jesus was an ordinary man who had delusions of grandeur.

St. Paul writes, "The message of the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved, it is the power of God." Did you ever wonder why more people aren't Christians? Did you ever wonder why the pews of this and every other Christian church isn't overflowing every Sunday?

The reason is that Christianity doesn't make sense. Our message is that our God died. That His glory came in a moment of shame. That He wins by losing. And that doesn't make sense. Everyone wants a powerful God- one who destroys all His enemies and gives His people power and wealth. Everyone loves a winner.

We proclaim a God who died. We're proud of it. We've got a whole day set aside for the Holy Cross. We parade around behind a cross. We sing "Lift High the Cross" and "In the Cross of Christ I glory." We wear crosses around our necks. We decorate our walls with crosses. You paid good money for a gigantic cross that you planted on the front lawn, and you shine a bright light on it every night for the whole neighborhood to see. Why?

There's a story that's told about a seminary student who was taking a final exam. The final exam had one question on it: "Jesus Christ- expound." Most of the students began writing furiously, writing everything they could think of about Jesus. But one student turned in his exam right away. Everyone in the class thought he had just given up. As it turns out, the student had not written a single word on the exam. Instead, he made a cross that covered the page. As the story goes, the student received an A+ for the exam.

Martin Luther said, "The cross alone is our theology." There's just one story in Scripture, and it goes like this. The world started with life, beauty, joy, perfection. It was spoiled by death, ugliness, sorrow, and brokenness. The Lord loved the world and gave His life on the cross to save it.

We heard this story in the Old Testament lesson. The people of Israel had been rescued from slavery and death in Egypt. They were on their way to the Promised Land. But they murmured and complained and were therefore oppressed by poisonous snakes. But the Lord still loved His ungrateful, complaining people, and saved them by a cross.

The cross stands in the center of history. The cross casts a shadow all the way back through the Old Testament and forward throughout the New Testament even to today, September 14, 2008 and your life. The cross brought life and healing to the Israelites in the wilderness. The cross brings life and healing to you, today.

Through the cross, you are baptized- "Receive the sign of the Holy Cross both upon your forehead and upon your heart to mark you as one redeemed by Christ the crucified." Through the cross your sins are forgiven- "God, in His mercy has given His Son to die for you, and for His sake forgives you all your sins." The cross is at the center of every Christian sermon.

The body and blood of Christ, that which was nailed to the cross are given to you in the Lord's Supper. Jesus said, "I tell you the truth, unless a grain of wheat falls to the ground and dies, it remains only a single seed. But if it dies, it produces much fruit."

Look around you. Jesus' death has produced much fruit. Because of the cross, you are here. Because of the cross, you have hope. Because of the cross, you have forgiveness. Because of the cross, you have life. This is the reason Jesus came into this world. Not to draw a crowd. Not to be proclaimed king. But to bring about victory over Satan. "Now the Prince of this world will be driven out."

On the cross it looked like Satan had won. On the cross it looked like Jesus has lost. In your life, it often looks like you have lost. In your life you will have times where it seems like you have lost. When death comes, when sickness comes, when you lose your job, when you see the reality of sin in your life, you feel like you've lost. You feel like a loser.

But on the cross all of these things die. Sin dies. Sickness dies. Loneliness dies. Death dies. Jesus took all of these things to the cross with him and they all died there. Those of you who live under the sign of the cross, who had been baptized by the crucified one, have already won, because you have been crucified with Christ.

This is why we lift high the cross. This is why there is glory in the cross. This is why we wear crosses and put them all over the place- to proclaim the victory of Jesus over all of our enemies.

Everyone loves a winner. And Jesus always draws a crowd. Jesus said, "I, when I am lifted up from the earth, will draw all men to myself." Everyone is drawn to the cross. But when they see Jesus there, different people see different things. Some see a pathetic loser, who died for no good reason. But we see the Christ, the Messiah, the Victor, the Winner.

"Sir," they said, "we would like to see Jesus."

"Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God."