

## ***“Winners and Losers”***

***A Homily by Stephen Martz for the people of Holy Innocents & St. Nicholas  
15 October 2006***

***Job 23:1-9, 16-17 + Psalm 22:1-15 + Hebrews 4:12-16 +  
Mark 10:17-31***

We live in a world of profit and loss, of winners and losers. (Rory Cooney, “Fly Together”). In business,

- YouTube is a big winner this week – to the tune of \$1.6 billion.
- GM and Ford are losers, Honda and Toyota are winners.
- The Los Angeles Times is a loser, says its owner, the Tribune Company, because even though it is making money, its profit margin is not large enough to satisfy investors.

In sports, the Mount Everest of winning and losing – and profit and loss,

- The Cubs are losers – they finished last in the National League – and so are the Yankees, who made the playoffs but got knocked out in the first round.
- The Tigers are winners – at least so far.
- And so are the Bears – or should I say, Da Bears? May it remain so. Unless they play my Redskins.

More seriously, we are increasingly a nation of winners and losers.

- Winners live in McMansions; losers live in poverty.
- Winners wear cars like designer clothes or beautiful jewelry. I think of the two traders in New York City who customized their Mini-Coopers with shark fins – the perfect emblem for their aggressive, devouring, win-at-all-costs approach to their craft.

- Losers, of course, don't have Minis, or designer clothes, or beautiful jewelry. A lot of losers live in New York City, where 1.5 million of its eight million residents live below the poverty line, and one-third of all New York City children under the age of five live in poverty. One third!

When you live in a culture of profit and loss, winners and losers, it's hard not to think of everything and everyone – even ourselves -- in those terms. And so we easily can look at ourselves and our churches as winners or losers.

- But is Holy Innocents a loser because we face a potential deficit of \$20,000 in 2007?
- Is St. Nicholas a loser because we can't pay our own way; because we have received diocesan financial assistance every year since our creation?
- Is Willow Creek a winner because thousands flock to it regularly?

Closer to home,

- Am I a loser priest because I work in small and struggling parishes instead of a multi-staff North Shore parish?
- Are those among us who face significant health problems losers because our bodies are not what they once were?
- Are you a winner, or are you a loser?

I begin with this bit of rhetorical flourish because today's readings take us into hard places and ask us to question our values and our relationship with God. Job feels abandoned by God, angry at his plight, and flat out terrified. *If only I could vanish in darkness, and thick darkness would cover me.*

The psalmist feels no better. *I am poured out like water; all my bones are out of joint; my heart within my breast is like melting wax...My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?*

Are these men losers? Or are they creatures of God, struggling with the joy and the despair that comes with being human?

What about the rich young man? He would seem to be a winner right off the bat. Young. Rich. Deep faith – he’s kept the commandments for years. And he wants to go deeper. He senses that as strong as his faith is, there’s more. He recognizes Jesus as one who knows the way to that “more.” And so he approaches him.

*Teacher, what must I do?*

*You must follow the commandments.*

*I know. I do. I have for a very long time.*

*Then you may be ready for the next step.*

*What is it?*

*You must learn the way of my friend Job, the way of suffering which is also the way of love.*

*And how will I know it? How do I seek it?*

*What do you value?*

*My riches and my possessions. My faith.*

*Let go of it all. Love those who are poor by sharing your riches with them. Love your fellow human beings even more than our commandments. Then come, join these brothers and sisters of mine, and follow me. I will show you the treasure of love.*

We all breathe the air of our culture. But we also breathe the air of faith, or we would not be here. And so often the intersection of the two is the place of our spiritual struggle, as it is for the rich young man.

This is because Jesus preaches a different, more difficult paradigm than winning or losing, one that says we find eternal treasure through our losses, and find life through death. Jesus tells us the *first will be last, and the last will be first*. These are paradoxes not easily metabolized, paradoxes that force us to struggle with how to live *in* our culture and live *by* our faith.

In the book of Job, it is through an unfair and complete experience of humiliation and loss that Job comes to know God in a new way. In today's psalm, the psalmist continues to search for God in the midst of an experience of utter abandonment and immense suffering. The words of the psalmist, of course, become Jesus' own, when he suffers his devastating rejection on the cross.

The cross. So many are forced to hang on the cross because we human beings have so much trouble following Jesus' commandment to love one another.

Everywhere we look, we see the cross, and our challenge is what we do with it.

- We see it in the terrible violence in Iraq
- It is present in the lives of the many Pakistani women who despite international protest continue to be victims of "vendetta rapes." The New York Times yesterday told the story of a 24 year old woman and her mother who were abducted and raped for 11 days by a family offended because a relative of hers had taken up with a woman of their family, and they were from a higher social caste.

- The one-third of all New York City children who live in poverty live on the cross.
- So do the children in our own neighborhoods who are hungry.
- The men and women who participate in the AA and GA groups meeting at St. Nicholas have hung on the cross – and so have their families.
- Those among us who are ill know the cross well.

So what do we do with the cross in the world – and in our own lives? I think we are called both to resist it and embrace it. This is what I think Jesus says to the rich young man.

Embrace it in this way. Empty yourself. Let go of what you are holding so you can receive what God wants to give you.

Resist it in this way: respond to the suffering of others. Give yourself in radical love to them. Use your riches to allay the suffering, rejection, and abandonment of those who are forced to live on the cross.

This is a difficult message. It would be hard to grasp even if it didn't fly in the face of our culturally-conditioned notions of winning and losing. Where these twin responses of embracing and resisting the cross come together is in Jesus' message of radical love for all of humanity.

For when we *embrace* the cross, we become One with God's suffering people and One with Jesus, who gave his life for us on a cross. And when we *resist* the cross, when we seek to change the lives and suffering of others – and ourselves – we become one with the God of life who raised Jesus from the dead.

Jesus invites the rich young man into the kingdom of radical love, of fierce, unconditional love for all people, especially the poor and marginalized. The rich young man struggles. He wants to let go. But in the end he cannot bear to lose what he has worked so hard to win. *How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!*

I will not be the first to mock him or cast a stone his way, for I know his struggle. And I know that Jesus is inviting you and me into that same kingdom of radical, unconditional love for all people. And like the rich young man, I struggle.

I want to let go. I want to open my hands wide and give myself to the poor, those whom God loves especially, and I want to take into my hands everything God offers me. But opening one's hands, and leaving them open, is never easy. Many of you share my struggle.

Can we bear to lose what we have worked so hard to win? Are we willing to sell our Mini-Coopers – or whatever it is we drive -- and give the money to the poor? Are we able to let go of our building and spend our resources in acts of radical, unconditional love? Will we be winners, or losers?

How hard it can be to enter the kingdom of God....  
....and how wonderful and exciting it is, too.