

Losers, Keepers

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Matthew 16:21 - 28

“Finders, keepers; losers, weepers.” We’ve all grown up with those words. Just an innocent little kid’s rhyme, right? Until you think about what those words actually mean, and what kind of lesson it teaches about how we treat each other.

Finders, keepers; losers, weepers, boils down to something like this: You lose something of value (whether material or sentimental value) and that loss causes you grief. Losing it makes you a weeper. Then I have the good fortune to find the thing you lost, and with it, the opportunity to do a kindness by returning the lost item to you. But I don’t. Instead I keep it for myself. Not only do I keep it, I gloat about right in front of you. Finders, keepers; losers, weepers!

No wonder Jesus scrambled the word order of the saying from “finders, keepers; losers, weepers” to “Finders, weepers; losers, keepers.” Isn’t that what he meant when he said, “Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake, will save it. For what will it profit them to gain the whole world and forfeit their life?”

In the movie, “A Simple Plan,” two brothers who are both dissatisfied with their disappointing lives, discover four million dollars in the cockpit of a downed plane. The pilot did not survive the crash to claim ownership of the loot. Nobody seems to be looking for the money. It’s “finders, keepers; losers, weepers” on a life-altering scale. At first it seems like they have found the means to the lives they always dreamed about. But in the end, these “finders” turn out to be weepers, not keepers. Each one has a plan to keep all the money for himself instead of dividing it with his brother. And then, both of them literally lose their lives and die without ever getting to enjoy a penny of what they found. The life they found ended in tragedy. So it is, that behind the illusion lies a reality that those who gain the world often do so at the price of their own souls.

Jesus offers an alternative principle for living that challenges the “Finders, keepers; losers, weepers” mentality. He says, If you want to save your life; if you want to find lasting security and be truly happy, then lose your life for my sake and the sake of the gospel. Exchange your ambitions for my vision for you. Trust that through surrender and letting go, not through finding and keeping at others’ expense, you will receive what God knows is best for you. “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross and follow me.”

Some people will gladly tell you about the crosses they bear. Their cross might be an illness, an addiction, or the loneliness of never finding someone to share their life with. Any of these could

certainly be a burden. But Jesus was very specific that a cross is something taken up as a *deliberate choice*; not some misfortune beyond our control that happens to us.

His description of cross bearing contains four action verbs, all of which pertain, not to the general public, but specifically to those who want to be his disciples. “If any want to *become* my followers, let them *deny* themselves and *take up* their cross and *follow* me.”

For some of his original disciples, denying themselves and following him meant taking up the exact same cross that Jesus did, because like him they were literally crucified for what they believed in. But notice that Jesus never said that his followers must take up *his* cross. He said they must take up *their* cross. *Their cross* will be the unique sacrifices that are required of them in the course of doing what Jesus did: caring for the sick, providing for the poor forgiving even enemies, and speaking out for peace and justice.

Jesus didn’t call his disciples to suffering for the sake of it. He called them to go out and live the gospel with words and deeds. But he knew doing that would almost always involve some form of sacrifice. Sacrifice is the result of following the call, not the call itself. Oswald Chambers put it well when he said, “To choose *to suffer* means that there is something wrong; to choose God’s will *even if it means* suffering is a very different thing. No healthy saint ever chooses suffering; he [or she] chooses God’s will, as Jesus did, whether it means suffering or not.” So, Jesus’ call to find your life by losing it through the taking up of *your* cross is an honest disclosure that following Jesus means risking something. It costs something. But even more, it also means gaining everything! It means that laying down a self-focused life and taking up a God oriented life will often mean making sacrifices. At the same time, it was Jesus’ assurance that in detaching ourselves from the false sources of security, we make room for the life that only God can deliver. And bring into being the reality God desires.

There are many extraordinary examples of people who have surrendered their lives in Christ-like fashion to live out and promote the gospel. People who took up their cross and found a new and more noble life by losing the life they had. People like Mother Theresa who left a comfortable life teaching rich girls in an exclusive convent to care for the untouchables in the filthy slums of Calcutta.

Or, people like Oscar Romero, who was Arch- Bishop of San Salvador. Romero used his office to speak out on behalf of the poor and persecuted people of El Salvador. Until one day the powers who felt threatened by his preaching sent a death squad to gun him down while he was conducting a Mass.

These are inspiring stories about the sacrifices made and impact made upon the world by such extraordinary people. But the truth is that you and I are neither Mother Theresa nor Oscar Romero. Again, Jesus isn’t asking us to carry *their* cross. He’s asking us to carry *OUR* cross. Not only will our cross be different from theirs, your cross will be different than mine, and different from the person sitting next to you. Oh, a few of us might do something that makes the world sit up and take notice. But most of us will bear the cross of Christ through lives of small but

consistent acts of witnessing and sacrifice that are too far below the notice of the world to invite much attention.

A great preacher once commented that “we think giving our all to the Lord is like taking a thousand-dollar bill and putting it on the table. Here’s my life, Lord. I’m giving it all. But the reality for most of us is that God sends us into the bank and has us cash in the \$1,000 for quarters. Then we go through life putting out 25 cents here, 50 cents there...”

That is not an excuse, however, to sell ourselves short. The Christ-following, cross-bearing life we find only finds space in our lives to the degree that we lose the other things taking up space there. When we hesitate to lose something in our service to God that we dearly want to keep...when we talk ourselves into keeping the things in life that we weep at the thought of losing...when we don’t get it, that there is nothing about the life we wish for that can compare with the life Jesus wants us to find...it is we who are losers, for it.

Jesus said finding the true life means denying and losing those things that stand in the way of our keeping the life God created us for. Peter’s problem was that he had those things backwards. When Jesus told the disciples that it was necessary for them to be losing him soon, Peter took exception. He wanted to keep things between them and Jesus the same as they had been. Jesus responded, “Get behind me, for you are setting your mind not on divine things but on human things.”

The Greek word translated there as “get behind” is the same word Jesus used when he called Peter to become a disciple, saying, “Follow me.” To become a disciple of Jesus means to deny whatever about ourselves gets our minds stuck on seeing life in terms of human things rather than divine things.

So, I encourage you to think of how God is calling you to lose yourself so as to find and keep your truest self. To be a loser and a keeper, while at the same being in solidarity with those who weep in the world.

Taking up our cross will mean putting down some things that we want to keep, but which actually stand between us and finding God’s purpose for our lives. Through it all, the point is not what it is that we might lose, but what the greater good is that we, and the world, stand to gain.

