

SERMON for Sunday, June 19, 2005  
Matthew 10:24-39, Romans 6:1-11

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### A Bunch of Losers

When my children were little, seemingly years ago as years fly by, they played on the same kids' soccer team for a couple of years – six and seven year-old boys and girls who sometimes focused on the game and the ball, and sometimes focused on the dog that a passerby was walking, or the more interesting grass and trees along the field's edge, or sharing a bit of conversation with a teammate, or wondering when it would be snack time and who brought the snack and what the chances were it would be a good one. They focused on their cool assistant coach, the high school soccer-playing son of the mother-turned-coach. They thought he was great, and he was, always congratulating everyone for their wonderful playing effort, encouraging them to play their best, never yelling except when he was excited when they made a goal, never putting anyone down in frustration or anger. Spencer was the perfect coach for young ones. We parents loved Spencer for his laid-back attitude, and so did the kids. We all gathered along the sidelines and cheered every effort. It was a great experience. That is, until there were some changes one year. A few new kids joined the team, and, of course, their parents joined the sideline team as well. And these particular parents were not as casual about the sport as most of us were. After several games, when the scores were not very favorable to our team, one mother proclaimed, with disgust in her voice, "I could hardly get Joey to come tonight – he's so discouraged that we never win." And my mouth dropped open and nothing came out.....in the three seasons that my kids had played, that topic never came up! Sure, if they won the game, they were happy, but if they lost, they were happy. After the game, they got in the car to come home sweaty, tired, and in good spirits. Win? Lose? Why was that important?

In fact, it is not important, neither in soccer, in football, in any sport or in any aspect of community life, personal life, social life, spiritual life. And yet we insist on dividing ourselves always into the winners...and if there are winners, there must be losers. And we who identify ourselves as Christians, who have answered the call and claim of God on our lives, are a bunch of losers. And that is good news.

Jesus describes what it is that a disciple must risk in order to follow Jesus. Up until now in the gospel narrative we have a more or less pleasant picture. I have always imagined the movie version of discipleship, Jesus walking along a beautiful shore and with a nod and a smile and a crook of the finger inviting Simon Peter, Andrew, James and John, Thaddeus, Bartholomew and the rest of the twelve to come along with him, and they did. The movie version in my head continues with the crowd scenes – children and butterflies and flowers, a big picnic on a hillside, great fishing on lovely lakes. And gentle Jesus giving water to a thirsty woman in the town plaza at the heat of the day, and generous Jesus reaching out a hand of healing. And then I read these words from Jesus and they do not fit into the movie script at all. No peace but turmoil, no harmony but discord, no comfort but discomfort, no reward. To go with Jesus is to become a loser.

For years – I guess all thirty-six year of my ministry – I have been wrestling with this notion of discipleship, as we all have, whether we are new to faith or whether we have claimed the name Christian for a long period of time. How is this identity seen by others? Does it make any difference in our personal priorities? How are we seen

by our neighbors, our friends? Do we make any difference in the world? Certainly we will not be able to answer all these questions today, or even tomorrow, or over many weeks. But I would like to share some thoughts with you about discipleship.

A couple of weeks ago I was with some pastor friends and we were lamenting, or grouching, as pastors sometimes do when they are together, about summer travel. Oh, not that we don't like to do it! Or that we are not eager about travel possibilities in the coming months. (And perhaps this situation is more keen to me as I anticipate a week of study leave beginning tomorrow.) The dilemma is this: You look forward to some refreshing time away, rush to kennel the dog and pack the suitcase, get all the details organized, settle into your seat on the plane or train or car, and take off. Inevitably along the way, either from the person next to you on the plane, or the neighbor of your cousin that you meet at a backyard barbeque, or the family behind you in line at Noah's Ark, from someone the dreaded question will come, after the 'where are you from' question. "What do you do?" And most of us in on this conversation admitted to having had a tongue-tied moment. To say, "I am a pastor" will often bring out the worst, confessions of past indiscretions, boasting of church attendance and activity, a claim to great spirituality although no church affiliation, a 'dear ann landers' kind of dilemma. Rarely an engagement person-to-person about non-religious issues, or a true conversation of matters of the heart and mind, issues of society and ethics. And so there goes the relaxing. What's a pastor to do? Don't tell anyone.....but we all confessed to having lied! Well, not exactly lying, just a shading of the truth. "I'm a counselor, a youth worker, a teacher, a theologian, a writer, an administrator of a non-profit organization that helps people." None of them exactly a falsehood, but certainly not a full disclosure. And besides it being more of a professional dilemma, we all shy away from putting it right out there: I am a disciple of Jesus Christ. The world and our neighbors think we might be irrelevant, or judgmental, or weird, or way off-base on what can be done to make life any better. In other words, we are losers in all the ways that the world values: we make no more money than anyone else, we have no instant cure for diseases of society, we cannot heal the body, we rely on an elusive thing called prayer, we fight among ourselves and sometimes even in the public arena, particularly about what God says, or what we think God says especially if God seems to agree with us, we are not the power-brokers in our communities or in our nation. And we are often almost embarrassed. We would rather look good and be winners, be on the top of the world's heap.

We have ingrained in us, erroneously, that disciples should be nice, a standard which we sometimes find almost impossible. And rightly so. The Christian message is not necessarily one of accommodation, one of passive acceptance, one of comfort and ease and going-along-with-the-flow. Jesus reminds us of that as in the gospel of Matthew he instructs his disciples on continuing his work of teaching and healing. The Christian message is far more strident and upsetting. I think we know that, we know what we do should upset the social order, that as we serve and stand with the poor and oppressed, as we serve as Jesus served the looked-down-upon widows and orphans, as Jesus served the prostitutes and ate with sinners, as Jesus asked his followers for total commitment, that if we live this way, we will not necessarily be thought of as nice. But we will reap the great reward of offering the love of God to a world in great need.

Harry Emerson Fosdick, a great preacher of Riverside Church in New York during the 1930's and 1940's concerned himself with some of the same issues, surprisingly, that occupy us now. Of course the times were different, the Great Depression, the

dark horizon of World War II, and the issues of American society and the global situation were not what they are today. But he saw that the church was having some of the same difficulty that we have today, wanting to be nice. And Dr. Fosdick preached in 1935: "The church...has been all thing to all people long enough. We have adapted and adjusted and accommodated and conceded long enough. We have at times gotten so low down that we talked as though the highest compliment that could be paid Almighty God was that a few scientists believed in him. Yet all the time, by right, we had an independent standing-ground and message of our own in which alone is there hope for humankind. The eternally real is the spiritual. The highest in us comes from the deepest in the universe. Goodness and truth and beauty are not accidents but revelations of creative reality. God is! On that point come out from among them and be ye separate!"

How will we explain ourselves to the world? That we know the truth, but we are fearful of telling it? That we have heard the message of salvation but cannot pass it on? That we are sure of our commitment to Christ but have a struggle with putting it first in our lives? That even face to face with the desperation of our brothers and sisters we sometimes turn away, so as not to upset others, or ourselves? St. Augustine, in the fourth century, said, "No servant of Christ is without affliction. If you expect to be free from persecution, you have not yet so much as begun to be a Christian." And as we hear the call from Jesus, we seek greater courage, we seek greater faith.

A story is told of Denmark in the Second World War. In their horrifying campaign against the Jews, the Nazis had decreed that from the next Sunday morning all Jews must wear yellow stars on the arms of their coats and jackets. Now Sunday was always, by tradition, the day in Copenhagen when the King of Denmark rode his horse through the city to keep up morale among his people; for though they were now yoked to Nazi tyranny – and he, a displaced ruler – everyone, nonetheless, continued to look to him for moral leadership and support. On the Sunday when the decree was to come into force, the King rode his horse, as usual, through the palace gates and into the city's streets. But as he did so everyone noticed that he was wearing a yellow star. A buzz of excitement spread across the city and within hours all its citizens were wearing yellow stars to make the decree absolutely unworkable.

What kind of stars shall we wear? The kind that declare we are popular, well-liked, powerful and right? That we have accepted a world divided into those on the top and those on the bottom, a world of winners and losers and we are winners? Or the kind of stars that declare that we are a bunch of losers, casting our lot with the poor and oppressed, with the ones in need of clothing and housing, with the ones who need a touch of companionship and healing, with the ones who need courage and hope?

God give us grace to be the best losers we can be. Amen.