

Christ the King
November 20, 2011
Matthew 25:31-46

Secret Lives

I want to win

Last weekend I attended a memorial service for my grandmother. After the service, I was sitting with my Aunt and a couple of grandma's longtime friends listening to them tell funny stories that helped me learn a little more about woman I barely knew. There was one story in particular, though that uncovered more about our family as a whole than it revealed about grandma.

Carlos and Elva (that's my grandparents name, really) planned a day-trip with friends that involved a two-hour boat ride. To pass the time, they decided they would play pinochle. Elva even brought a new deck of cards. They played, and the cards grandma was dealt were unkind that day. Losing hand after hand, she began to grumble, mumble and curse. Finally, fed up with bad cards, bad luck and losing, she gathered up all the cards and through them overboard. The friends looked on in awe. My grandfather sighed, "Elva, that was new deck."

My grandmother was a fierce competitor. She wanted to win. She raised a family of competitive children, and they installed the value playing to win in their children as well. We want to win. We want to be winners. I realize that this isn't just a Krombholz quirk. A fiercely competitive Spirit fills the air we breathe, seeps into the water we drink, and taints the food we eat. We want to win. More than that, we want to *be* winners.

Winners and Losers

As we've been meeting to reorganize and restart an interfaith hospitality network in this county, it's been troubling to think of the tremendous need for this kind of transitional program, especially for working poor families who have for some reason lost their housing. They have lost.

The loss of health, the loss of a job, the loss of a partner or spouse, or some other kind of loss, big or small upsets the delicate balance of their home economics. They lose. They simply cannot compete anymore. I do not think many of us can truly comprehend the crushing condemnation that comes with such loss. We are, by and large, winning, but our relative success cannot undo the basic assessment, it's competitive out there. We're competing for jobs and housing, food and water and all different kinds of resources. At the individual level, the household level, the corporate or business level, even states and nations compete.

In this competitive world many people, families, nations lose every day. It's no secret that a lot of them are losing because the companies and agencies that once employed them need to retain or regain their competitive edge. A competitive world means someone's going to win; someone's going to lose. It may be those us on the left; or those of us on the right. Who knows?

Like it or not, who or what will determine our ultimate success or failure remains largely out of our hands and beyond our control. A competitive Spirit reigns over almost every aspect of life.

So, it is no wonder that when we hear Jesus tell us that soon he will come again and sit on the throne of his glory and gather all the nations of the world and separate us into groups as a shepherd separates sheep from goats that we understand this decisive division in terms of winners and losers.

What do you do with all those losers?

Jakob, Luke and I have started playing Candyland lately. It's the most basic of games, but for a 4 and 5 year old it's a gut wrenching struggle to make it to King Candy's castle first. We all start out at the same spot, but we know things are going to happen along the way and not all of us are going to make it to the promise of candied delights at the end of the journey. Someone's going to lose. And let me tell you, there is weeping and gnashing of teeth. It's interesting though to sit still and watch and see what happens as the game ends, to see what happens to the losers.

A year ago, one of our favorite restaurants went out of business. Over the course of a couple of years, we got to know the owner and her family and she got to know us and ours. Then one night we came to eat and found the store empty and sign on the door. She hadn't paid the rent. The store was closed. She had lost. In the back of our mind, we knew that most restaurants don't make it. The location wasn't that great, and there was a lot of competition. That's the way the market works. But what happens to that woman and her family? What happens to those who lose in the market place? To the weak and unfit and vulnerable who cannot survive?

We know when we start not everyone will make it to King Candy's Castle. That's the rules of the game, the way of the world, the law of the jungle, and yet, what do you do with the 99 percent who stumble, fall and fail? Throw them out? Discard them. That seems like waste of time, energy and people. What a waste of nice new deck of cards to throw it into the deep. What a waste of goats to send them off to eternal torture.

A world without winners or losers

Now, I think, we have to watch out when Jesus starts telling us stories. He has this way of turning them around to catch us in our own game. For a second, let's back away from the big picture that Jesus draws of a world divided: right and left; sheep and goats; righteous and unrighteous. And just listen to what Jesus reveals of his standard for judgment.\

He talks about feeding the hungry, giving drink to thirsty, clothing the naked, visiting the sick and imprisoned, welcoming the alien and strange. He's talking about loving, caring relationships maintained with those who have lost, in some way or another – lost their food, water, clothing, freedom, homeland, you name it, they have lost it and no one knows it. Right in the middle of this story that seems to be about winning and losing eternal life and salvation, Jesus tells us that in God's kingdom there is no competition for food, water, clothing, shelter, freedom, land, resources ... anything. He tears up the laws of the free market; nullifies natural selection;

overturns every evolutionary law and strikes down every predatory practice. Within this story of judgment and condemnation we find lives of grace, mercy and limitless, unconditional love.

And surprise of surprises, we discover that the one who sits on the throne, risen from the dead, and ruling over all of creation is the same one who was rejected, crucified and died, the same one who made himself one with the least and the loser. No one recognized Christ the king in the ones who have lost everything. No one. But some recognized a loser as a neighbor, the least as a sister or brother and loved them, redeemed them, restored them. In doing so, they revealed themselves as children of the lamb who gave his life to take away the sin of the world and not subjects of the lion-king who sits at the top of a cruel, predatory food chain. By God's grace, they behaved as if they lived in an uncompetitive world without winners or losers, a world where we saw in each other's face the image of the God who created and redeemed us to live again as sisters and brothers.

One evening after a particularly violent game of Candyland, one of my boys – mad, frustrated and sad because he had lost – was ready to throw the game across the room. His brother, though stopped him. Showed him the good things in the castle and asked him to join him there – a winner too. And there was a glimpse of what's God is doing to us by raising Jesus from the dead and seating him on God's throne in glory. God invites you to just come on in, heir of all God's goodness. No winner or loser. Just delight in each other's life and presence.

Believe it or not that is what the Christ is building right now among us, out of us, with us and for us. You, you are the sheep, and Christ himself promises to reveal himself and the power of his life-giving, life-sustaining love as we love and care for each other without a hint of competition.

Can we imagine it? Can we live in it – by faith, in hope, filled with love? Maybe. Maybe not. Like this parable, ours is an open story. There's still time. There's still time. There's still time. Amen.