

*God's Way with Losers*

Exodus 16:2-15; Matthew 20:1-16

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In the last couple of years, the epithet "loser" has become part of American political rhetoric. It functions as a catch-all term for people on the wrong side of anything – terrorism, immigration, ethnicity, economics, and more. When I hear a politician describe a person or class of people as "losers," I am reminded of my doctoral adviser's description of Jesus' mission: "To bring salvation to the losers as well as the lost." Jesus loves losers.

Let's be honest, Pittsburgh doesn't like losers. Let us have no illusions about this – Steeler Nation's strength is directly tied to the team's success. I became a Steelers fan back in the days of Chuck Noll, Mean Joe Greene, Lynn Swann, and Franco Harris. I doubt the Steelers would have captivated me in the 1960s, because back then they were losers. From 1964-1971, they won only 35 games while losing 79.

One thread woven through all Scripture is God's love for losers. God loves Israel even though they are small and weak and faithless. Paul points out that God calls the foolish, those at the bottom of the socio-economic scale, to show forth the greatness of God. The cross is itself a symbol of ultimate loss, a physical representation of the way to which Jesus calls us, namely to lose our life for his sake.

We don't like today's parable very much. It's just not fair. And surely God is fair; if not, then God is not good. This parable breaks apart our neat moral world. But today I want us to focus on something *other* than how this parable challenges our moral sensibility.

We usually pay great attention to the outrage of the full-day workers, because that's how we see ourselves. We've given so much, even more than asked. Indeed, we're so dedicated we even go to presbytery meetings! Or perhaps we focus on the vineyard owner, with his crazy pay scale, and try to justify him. We make this parable an occasion for working on our theodicy, trying to justify God when God doesn't make sense to us.

But today I want to look not at the full-day laborers and their outrage, nor at the crazy vineyard owner. Let's spend some time considering the idlers, the losers that stand on the street while the rest of the world works. The indolent who sleep off last night's excess while others rise at dawn to make the world work. They are the centerpiece of the story, showing up time and again, each batch worse than the former. And at the end of the day we hear no thanks from them. They seem to think they deserve every bit of what they are paid.

The idlers do nothing to get their lives back in order. They get in on the gravy train simply because a generous employer reaches out to draw them in.

Some thirty years ago, Tammy and I served a church in a southern city. Each morning a group down on their luck congregated in a nearby area looking for day work. Employers in need of

cheap, unskilled labor would come downtown looking for people willing to work for a day. If you wanted to work, you had better get out there by 7:00, or you'd be left out.

Later in the day many of those who hadn't gotten up for work came by our church to collect one of the free sack lunches that Tammy distributed. Some were drunk already, others hung over from the night before. None of them ever expressed to me any remorse that they had not gotten up and out to work. Many of them relied instead on their panhandling skill to con people out of whatever they could. They justified their manner of collecting cash by declaring that those who hired day laborers each morning were themselves crooks and con artists.

One day I noticed one of these guys who'd just gotten a bag lunch from Tammy leaving the building with a suspiciously large stomach; I stopped him and asked him to open his coat, which revealed a 15-pound ham that he had taken from our refrigerator. It had been purchased by our seniors' group for their holiday dinner the next day. Rather than being apologetic, he was utterly indignant at me for denying him that which by all rights ought to have been his, since society had dealt him such a bum deal.

This is the sort of people that were hanging around later in the day when the employer in Jesus' story returned to town. The story isn't about the master being generous to the weak or the poor, but to bums. To losers.

They get better than they deserve, thankless as they are. And that's exactly how God is with you and me.

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Their feet are still tingling from their joy-dance at their deliverance, when victory-chanting Israel morphs into a chorus of sore losers. They are hungry, and suddenly they turn on Moses and Aaron, complaining bitterly at how they've done the people evil. They long for the wonderful things they enjoyed back in in Egypt. *Really??!!*

How quickly our spectacles turn rosy when we look back to yesterday! Everything was SO much better then than it is now! We had all we wanted, and more. We were rolling in money, people flocked to our company, everyone was in harmony. Now here we are, shriveling away. Our rolls are diminishing our public influence waning. Can't we just go back to how things used to be? "Make the church great again!" we demand of our pastor, or our presbytery, or our denomination.

The King James calls Israel's complaint "murmuring." In Hebrew it is literally the sound of chewing the cud over and over, refusing to let something go, continuously growling. Their complaining is unstoppable.

So Moses and Aaron go to the Lord, exasperated and indignant with these thankless losers to whom they've given their very best, for whom they've risked everything. What does God do in

response to Israel's torrent of bile? God gives them an abundance of meat in the evening and bread in the morning. God shows none of our human tendency to scold the thankless, or insist that complaining children ask nicely.

Of course, we know the rest of the story. Eventually God responds differently, and there is much to learn from that longer story. God does not tolerate ingratitude forever. But what we see here at Israel's first wilderness crisis is God's remarkable kindness toward people behaving badly. God does not greet sore losers with a wagging finger, but with an open hand.

Where do *we* fit in this story? Let's be honest – we are the crowd of complainers, losers who deserve nothing but the back of God's hand. Yet we get an open hand instead. If God is so gracious to us, how dare we be ungracious to each other?

Wherever we see blame-mongering, something other than the Spirit of God is at work. Wherever ingratitude persists, God's people have forgotten the wonder of their salvation. Fault-finding is never in the repertoire of the company of the faithful. Oh, we have faults aplenty. We are all losers, abundantly so. Yet God gives us all we need, no matter our ingratitude.

This is what happens in Jesus' parable – all the people the master calls get everything they need, regardless of what they deserve.

In Numbers 11 the story of quails is cast as one of judgment, with the people gorging themselves sick. Sometimes God brings water to them one way, sometimes another. The one thing constant through the entire Exodus is the manna. "What is it?" It is God meeting the needs of losers as well as the lost. Always. Judgment and blessing rise and fall, but the manna stays constant.

The bread of heaven is always ready to feed us, to give us what we need for today's journey. At our Lord's Table, losers are always welcome. The Master says, in fact, "Go out and compel them!" to the feast. This is our example for how we are called to relate to *all* who are rejected, alien, different, foreign. After all, this is God's way with us. For *all* of us – no exceptions – are losers. And precisely as such, we have our place reserved at his Table.

Yet this is not the end of our story. Losers that we are, suddenly we realize that in God's eyes we are not "losers" all. We have a new identity: Beloved. Children. Heirs. Saints. *Really??!!* Yes, really! Thanks be to God.