

August 30, 2020 – Matthew 16:21-28

People love an underdog story. It's in our nature, I think. We love the idea of the little guy, the downtrodden, the perpetual failures rising up in victory. I have plenty of underdogs that I've rooted for during my life.

I've loved and used products from Apple Computer since my childhood. Back when they were dismissed and looked down upon by other computer nerds like me, and long before they were trendy. I'm a fan of the Cleveland Browns. One of only two teams in the NFL who have been around for the entire Super Bowl era and yet have never been to the Super Bowl.

And, honestly, America was founded by underdogs. The Revolutionary War was a bunch of ragtag minutemen going up against the professional British army... and winning! It's in our national DNA to love that kind of story.

There's something comforting and encouraging about being an underdog. About being part of the misunderstood and misrepresented and maligned that appeals to us. About thinking that, despite the odds, there's always a chance you'll win. And so, people often like like rooting for underdogs. They often like being underdogs.

And when we look at Christianity, it's easy to get swept up in underdog enthusiasm. We see it all over the place. Christians in the media railing against all the ways the church is oppressed in modern society, often to huge ratings and nationwide support. Christians in music and youth culture proclaiming all the ways that being a Christian is counter-cultural and makes you part of a rebellion and an oppressed minority. It's everywhere.

And to a certain extent, it's a valid perspective. St Paul certainly tells us not to conform to the ways of this world. He spends all of our Epistle, in fact, running through a laundry list of activities that Christians should and should not be involved with.

Abhor evil. Love one another. Show honor. Be fervent and serve the Lord with zeal. Show patience. Pray. Be generous. Bless those who persecute you. Live in harmony. Don't be conceited. Don't seek revenge. Help your enemies. Bury them in your good works. Until they're ashamed they ever tried to hurt.

These are things that will inevitably set us apart from society. Activities that are so different from the world – so good and righteous and loving – that they can overcome the world's evil. Make people question everything they think they know about Christians. They are truly the lifestyle of a disciple.

But at the same time, if you are here because you like to be the underdog beating the odds, because you like to be part of the oppressed minority, because you like to shame people by your good conduct... well, then, you're not behaving like a Christian. You're behaving like a Pharisee.

Because that's exactly what the Pharisees did. We like to think about the Pharisees as the leaders of Judea. And they were part of the religious leadership. But they weren't the political leaders. They weren't the dominant cultural force.

No, the Pharisees were underdogs and they liked it. They liked rubbing their differences in other people's faces. They liked following rules that no one else followed and knowing things about the God's Word that no one else knew. They liked showing off their self-righteousness and shaming others into being just like them.

But that is not what Jesus is talking about in our Gospel lesson. Despite what you may have heard from Christian writers and speakers and theologians, being an underdog is not the same as taking up your cross and following Jesus. Being an underdog is not the same as losing your life for Him.

Because, you see, if it were, then when Jesus took up His own cross it would have been a far different event. It would be the act of a proud martyr, rallying His loyal followers by bravely marching into the teeth of Roman tyranny. Taking beatings and crucifixion on a cross like they were nothing at all. Because this was His noble cause and He was the oppressed minority suffering for it.

But that's not what happened on Calvary's mountain. Jesus didn't go to the cross proudly. He went humbly, as a convicted felon suffering the death penalty. He didn't go to the cross to rally the people to His cause. He went under a barrage of hateful scorn, spitting, and mockery. He didn't take the pain of whips and piercing of nails with brave endurance. He cried out in despair to the Father above who had sent Him to this fate.

Jesus wasn't seen as an underdog by those around Him. He was seen as a loser. He wasn't seen as an oppressed martyr. He was seen as a common criminal. He didn't suffer because He wanted to. He suffered because of their sinfulness and because of our sinfulness.

This is the man that we are to emulate. This is the fate that we are to embrace. Not proud underdogs fighting valiantly until we win an unlikely victory. But humble losers, suffering through the trials of a sinful world, while society looks on and mocks the God who doesn't save us from pain and turmoil and death.

So why do we do it? Why do we pick up this cross and walk a path of pain and suffering? Why follow Jesus all the way up Calvary's mountain? Why do we come after this man who came to such a miserable end?

Well, we do it out of hope. Hope of the resurrection. Hope that just as we faithfully endure the life that Christ endured, so God will faithfully raise us on the last day to the eternal life that He gave His own Son.

But more than that, we do it for what it means in this life as well. For you see, just as Jesus prophesied about the life of pain and death that Christians will endure for His name, He also makes another prophecy at the very end of our Gospel lesson: *"Truly I tell you, some who are standing here will not taste death before they see the Son of Man coming in His kingdom."*

It's a bit of a perplexing prophecy. What is He talking about? The disciples are all dead and gone. Jesus has not returned. And this has led to a variety of interpretations.

Liberal theologians will simply tell you that Jesus was wrong. Or that, He didn't actually say this. It was added by the author. Conservative theologians will often try to play linguistic gymnastics with it. "Oh, the disciples didn't taste death. They're alive... in heaven."

No, there's a better way to look at this passage. Because we aren't waiting for Jesus to come into His kingdom. He's in His kingdom right now. Not only did He ascend into heaven, but He is right here among us now, in Word and Sacrament.

No, Jesus isn't coming into His kingdom on Judgment Day. He already came into His kingdom on that cross. And some who heard that prophecy were alive to see it happen. Only some. Not all. Judas was, unfortunately, hanging by a rope somewhere, overcome with guilt, unbelief, and despair.

But those disciples who stood at Jesus' feet as He bled and died for them? They saw what it means to be in the kingdom of God. It means faith in the midst of adversity. Perseverance in the midst of rejection. Prayer in the midst of pain. And hope in the midst of death.

Jesus was not an underdog. He was a loser. And He lost His life for our sake. We are not underdogs. We are losers. And we lose our lives for His sake. But in that loss, we enter the kingdom of God. And we gain more than any winner ever has. Amen.