



**LOSING TO WIN**  
**SCRIPTURE: PSALM 22, MARK 8: 31-38**  
**GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC**  
**February 25, 2018**

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When he picked himself off the ground he was in 68<sup>th</sup> place, that's dead last. He got tripped at the beginning of the 18-mile race; two other athletes fell on top of him and one of his ski poles was broken. It was 16 degrees, the wind was whipping. Simen Hegsted Krüger, figured the race was over for him.

The Norwegian 23 year old cross country skier's first Olympics was fast becoming a hard luck story, a story of profound disappointment and loss.

But Krüger quickly banished those thoughts from his mind. He got up, his coach handed him a new pole and Krüger began picking people off in the race one by one.

One hour and 16 minutes later he not only finished the race that looked like a lost cause at the beginning, he crossed the finish line for the gold medal with the rest of field so far behind him they couldn't even see him ahead of them at some points in the race.

It doesn't get any better than this, does it! These are the stories we love to hear—the triumphant individual who overcomes seemingly insurmountable odds only to be victorious and celebrated in the end.

But what about those other two athletes who were most affected by Krüger's fall—in all the celebration we've heard nothing about them—one by the way came in 4<sup>th</sup> and one came in 30<sup>th</sup>. One just missing a medal for his herculean efforts, one crossing the finish line with little to no recognition of the mountain he climbed to finish mid-pack.

It is harder for us to know how to feel about the suffering and disadvantage that don't lead to a satisfying victory, to celebration and affirmation. What does that kind of suffering mean—and how do we, as people of faith, orient ourselves to the fact that suffering doesn't always end in triumph, suffering doesn't always make us winners in this world.

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All the religions and spiritualities of the world want to speak into this difficult truth about suffering.

Christianity has argued with itself about our relationship to suffering and how it connects to the life of faith since its beginnings. Is it about endurance, is it about punishment, is it about resilience, or is it about redemption? Do we welcome

suffering as a means to righteousness? Do we avoid suffering as a means to happiness? How can we alleviate suffering? How do we connect God to suffering?

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The argument is nowhere more intense than in our passage today in the Gospel of Mark—when Jesus explains his relationship to suffering, when Jesus lays bare that he will “undergo great suffering, and be rejected by the elders, the chief priests, and the scribes, and be killed, and after three days rise again.”

Peter does not like it—so much so that he pulls Jesus aside and calls him crazy. The word used here for “rebuke” is the same word used for exorcisms and casting out demons.

In a culture that was hierarchical like the one Jesus and Peter were living in, a disciple or a student would never take his teacher aside and take this tone and tell him he’s crazy. Peter’s reaction would have very well been seen as arrogant—and often arrogance is born of insecurity, often arrogance is born of fear. And fear can make us defensive and defiant.

Jesus pushes back—“get behind me, Satan.” You’re focusing on the wrong things—you’re focused on your status, on your acceptance, on your comfort. You need to focus on divine things—on truth, on justice, on love—on the lengths to which God will go to heal the world.

Jesus said, “Take up your cross and follow me.” This must have been a shocking, utterly sobering realization for Peter. Following Jesus was going to cost him everything. All the social capital he had built up, all the ways he’d learned to be dutiful, acceptable, respectable—all of those things were being turned upside down. Losing was winning, and winning was losing. For Peter, in this moment, the best-case scenario is that Jesus is crazy.

This passage has a lot of unresolved tension—one of our least favorite kinds of suffering—having to sit with conflict and tension and things that are not resolved.

And this tension sets the stage for the complicated relationship Christians have had with suffering ever since. You see it’s easy to get confused about what Jesus is saying to us here—pick up your cross—that’s come to be equated with the virtue of resigning ourselves to suffering, or worse yet, even inviting more suffering in our lives to make us feel like martyrs, victims who bear our crosses with resignation and obedience. Christians have feverishly looked for ways to resolve this tension around why we suffer by trying to find ways that make suffering God’s doing or God’s desire.

But there is nothing in this passage that says God delights in human suffering—or that God thinks suffering is good, or that God thinks we should suffer without lament.

Human life includes suffering—Jesus doesn't tell us suffering is our means to salvation, he tells us our relationship to suffering is a window into our relationship to him—to him, Jesus, our means of salvation.

This Christ-centered relationship to suffering has been a difficult practice for Christians for a long, long time.

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In the third century, not but a few generations after Jesus and Peter faced off on this issue, Origen, the first real biblical and theological scholar of Christianity, aspired to follow his father into Christian martyrdom. Origen's father was beheaded during a time of persecution in the early Christian church.

Origen's relationship to suffering was extreme—he slept on the floor, he owned no shoes, he ate no meat and drank no wine. He even castrated himself at one point taking a few verses in the Bible literally.

Later in life Origen was tortured by other Christians because of his stance on theological issues like the nature of the human soul and salvation. He was kept alive only in an effort to try and get him to renounce his faith. When the emperor who had ordered his torture died and Origen had not renounced, they let him go free. His body was so broken at that point that he died not long after his release.

Origen was actually a mystic—and wrote beautifully about the wonders of God's love—one of the reasons he was called by some “the heretic of heretics” was because of his belief in universal salvation.

How painful that such a generous soul was so harsh toward his own body. And how tragic that the suffering he endured was multiplied by other believers who wanted to make him suffer for his belief that God's grace is for all of humanity.

Distorted understandings of suffering have continued to stitch their way through the collective Christian psyche. Suffering has been used to condemn, to exclude, to shame and to blame. Christians through the ages have used the suffering of some as a sign of their sin—that God brought it on as punishment, that such suffering was a way to determine those who stand outside the bounds of God's grace.

These distorted relationships to suffering obscure the promise of what Christ invites the crowd to do in Mark's gospel, and what Christ is inviting us to do—to take up your cross and follow him to a place where suffering is not only vindicated, but

where we are healed. Christ's suffering isn't just about a victory in the end, it's about freedom, it's about healing our deepest wounds.

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When Jesus says, "take up your cross and follow me," he is telling us not to pack light on our journey in his service. He is asking us to bring our whole selves.

Bring all your shame, your suffering—the suffering you bear and the suffering you cause, the suffering that has made you stronger and the suffering that has left you weary, diminished, not sure if you can go on—pick it all up and bring it with you—your doubts and your fears, your anger and your despair. And bring it with you because whatever you deny that you have, cannot be healed.

It is faith that makes us believe in the worthiness of telling the truth about ourselves, of believing that God can use our suffering to heal us.

That is a categorically different state of being than looking for ways to suffer so that we can endear ourselves to God.

God is not a twisted masochist. God is a tenacious composter—God can take all of our crap and grow things from it. Do you believe that God can heal you this way? Do you believe that God can free you from the weight of the suffering you bear, and the suffering you've caused? Do you believe in the freedom of the cross—a cross that dies and rises by laying bare the sins of the world?

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We are in a pivotal moment in our country's life—indeed in the life of this planet. There is no shortage of suffering. Suffering is a fact of life. And it reveals the ravages of injustice and hate and woundedness. How we orient ourselves to the suffering of the world is the most pressing challenge before us as people of faith today—especially for us as Christians, as people who believe in a suffering God.

Our eyes these last several days have been trained toward Parkland, FL—another horrific school shooting. A maddening story of multiple interventions and warning signs of an angry young white man armed to the teeth. A wearying reenactment of political denial and manipulation and greed. There is so much tension in this country right now—if you can't feel it, you are in denial.

Not only is there unspeakable suffering, but the most sinister thing about human life these days is how many people are profiting from the suffering of others.

And so the students of Parkland are rising up, they are calling us out—all of us—the adults, the believers, the alleged justice seekers, those who profess to make our laws and those who say they want our children to be safe.

They are taking up their crosses—the weight of their trauma, the weight of their grief, the heaviness of their memories, the shards of their broken dreams, the burdens of their anger, the burdens of our collective anger—and they are showing us what it looks like to believe that there has got to be a better way. And they are joining so many other young people in our country, #blacklivesmatter #takeaknee #metoo, and in our world who are saying “please stop hurting us, please stop making more suffering than there has to be.”

And if we are to take up our crosses and follow them on this road—this road to a better way, we must not deny any of the burdens that are ours to carry—the weight of our privilege, of our blind spots, of the comforts we feel entitled to, of the unconscious ways we see some bodies as more disposable than others, and the ways our comfort comes at the expense of the safety of others.

The kids in Parkland and in Ferguson and in Los Angeles and all over the world are holding us all accountable for our denial and our complacency and our culpability. They are holding a mirror up to us that is hard to look at—a mirror that calls us again to examine how we have positioned ourselves toward the suffering of the world.

If you are more tired of the protests than you are of gun violence, take up your cross. If you are more uncomfortable with talking about race than you are about racism persisting, take up your cross. If you are more fed up with having to read bad news in the newspaper than you are with poverty and mass deportation and incarceration, take up your cross. If you are more afraid of people finding out the truth about you, than you are afraid of living a life, take up your cross.

Because Jesus needs you to bring it all—all the things that are keeping you and me and us from truly following him and not looking back. He is calling us home—to a place where we can be at home with ourselves, at home with each other, at home with the world, at home with our Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer.

I don't know the answer to this question: Can we take up our crosses in these pressing times? I do know this: Losing to win isn't a very attractive prospect in a world that has taught us that winning means having it all. And yet here we are claiming that we believe in a God who loves us fiercely enough to believe we are worthy of such a calling.

Grace Covenant, let no one mistaken us for a people ashamed of Christ's ways in this world. Let them instead see in us the courage that really counts when its time for us to stand up and be healed.

Thanks be to God.