The Art of Losing

*The art of losing’s not too hard to master...though it may look like disaster.* (Elizabeth Bishop)

‘For he who is least among you all is the one who is great.’ Lk 9:48

From our earliest days, we learn to value and desire winning, beating out others to be the best. In my house we have lots of board games; Monopoly, Scrabble and Chess. In all these games there is one winner, and the goal is to be that winner. In school we have lots of sports; football, soccer and baseball. In these games, there is one winner and the goal is to be that winner. All of life, it seems, is a competition, the survival of the fittest. All of us want to be the lion, not that poor antelope dangling from its mouth.

I am not here to tell you that competition, winning and success is bad. Indeed, the discipline and drive of competition may help us be better stewards of what we’ve been given. And after all, God created all life, and winning is a big part of it. In fact, let’s just say winning is 50% of life. But that means that losing is the other 50%. And here is where our problem arises. We spend all of our energy and values on ‘the art of winning’ half, and almost none on ‘the art of losing’ half, thereby becoming half the people we were meant to be. When inevitably we face loses in our lives, we have no practice dealing with them and no defenses, so they overwhelm us and become disastrous.

There is help for us. The church wrote the book on the ‘art of losing’ it is our Holy Scriptures. And perhaps the main reason why none of us take it seriously enough, is because we want to be self-made men and women, with the will to win, most all the time. The scriptures start from a different place. It begins with a disastrous human-led fall, and only ends with a blessed God-led rising up. The scriptures teach us that the art of losing is the only way to ultimately win.

This is not just abstract theology, but very practical stuff. It informs 50% of our lives, all those times when we lose. My kids need it so that a board game doesn’t end in a shouting match. Tom Brady needs it so that one ugly 48-3 loss doesn’t lead to ugliness in the locker room and a losing season. Democrats and Republicans need it, since every few years, half the country are winners and half are losers, yet we continue to live, work and pray together. Most of all these days, we Armenians need scriptural wisdom on the art of losing. We have just lost an ugly war; many precious young men, myriad homes and livelihoods. A football game is one thing, but how do we face the terrible losses of war without turning on each other? How do we let our loss be our lesson so that tomorrow we might emerge victorious?

Our entire Bible guides us in ‘the art of losing’-from Joseph to Jacob to Jesus-but today’s assigned reading-yet again-speaks specifically to the challenge of these days. In it, Jesus must tell his ‘brothers in arms’-the disciples-what they least want to hear—that they are going to lose, and lose badly. ‘Let these words sink into your ears,’ he urges, ‘for the Son of Man is to be delivered into the hands of men.’ Jesus is preparing his students and himself for a disastrous loss, where the expected liberation of the Jewish people will be crushed, he will be executed, and they will abandon him to a man. How do the disciples take the news? They start fighting with each other. Unable to face their great loss, they try for cheap wins; posturing about who is the greatest among them. Jesus breaks up the fight by bringing in a child and admonishing them, saying ‘he who is least among you all is the one who is great.’ In other words, the one who is strong enough to lose, is the one who will be blessed to win, for God’s power is made perfect in weakness.

In Armenia these past days, we have seen the shocking loss in Karabakh turn into civic unrest and ugly political infighting. But Armenians have a much deeper scriptural wisdom to draw from in the art of losing, the still small voice of God heard through the chaos. I heard that small voice in interviews with regular people on the street. I heard it in several interviews with leaders in Artsakh and Armenia. Stop looking for betrayals and people to blame, they said. Stop seeking saviors or demons in foreign countries. Let’s look at ourselves. Outmanned and outgunned, we fought valiantly. But we lost, and our loss must be our lesson. Those lessons are many, and are primarily for the citizens of Armenia and Artsakh to decide. But, the lesson for us all who have lost-be it a friend, a job, a marriage, our health or our life-is that the one who learns to lose like our Lord, will be blessed to win; for God’s power is made perfect in weakness.
God knows, losing isn’t easy. Because it is so painful, it is a very natural decision to try and live our lives only for the winning. But if we do, we will take our losses much harder, and will one day find that we have only been living half a life. To live a full life, an abundant life, we must learn the art of losing, and here Jesus is our master teacher. For the One who lost everything, saved all of creation. The most humble servant, became the most exalted king. In all the losses we face from small to great, may we learn to lose like our Lord, so that, through him, we will ultimately prevail; now and always, amen.