

Sunday November 20, 2011 10:30 AM

“Guaranteed Victory”

St. Matthew 25:31-46

Ephesians 1:15-23

St. Matthew 25:40

And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

I love to win.

The other night Debi and I watched the TV show “Parenthood”, which we enjoy. It’s not as good as the classic Steve Martin movie upon which it was based, but it’s pretty good.

But they had a story line where a little girl was always allowed to win when she played games with her parents, so when she entered the wider world of her extended family – and especially the wider world of her grandfather, who I’ve been told reminds someone of another grandfather at times – and she either wins or loses on the merits of the game, she is unprepared to lose.

Well, for better or worse, my son and daughter never had to deal with that problem, there was no “letting” anyone win in our home.

I love to win, which doesn’t mean that I always win, far from it. In fact my love of winning comes, in large part, from my losing experiences. And I know that I have learned too much, of great value, from losing to have ever wanted to spare my children from those lessons.

All of that comes to mind today not only because I spent yesterday watching Rutgers win, in convincing style for a change, but because today is a special day in the Church year, actually it is three special days in the Church year.

It is the last Sunday in Church Liturgical Year, New Year's Eve in our worship patterns and rhythms, next week we wind it up and turn it on for Advent, the beginning of a brand new Church year.

It is "Christ the King Sunday" when we stop to consider the strength and security and confidence that comes to us by way of our King, our ultimate loyalty.

And it is, in our nation, Thanksgiving week.

And I have found, over the years, that the third point, Thanksgiving, is what brings meaning to the first two: it is when we add gratitude to our experiences of the past, and when we add gratitude for our expectations for the future, that we win.

And I'm not talking about winning in a singular, selfish, Charlie Sheen-like way, I am talking about winning together because our winning is always plural, always shared and always guaranteed.

Here's what I mean, start with the fact that this is the end of the year.

What kind of year has it been – for you individually, for us as a Church – since last Advent?

Where have the victories been?

What have we been through?

What have we celebrated?

What have we mourned?

Where have the joys and growth spurts been?

Where are the wounds and sorrows?

I'm not going to ask you to turn to each other and pour out your hearts here and now, but please use this week, this time that we have, to look back, to give thanks.

Start with the easy stuff, talk to each other about the births, the weddings, the special moments that we have had, new relationships discovered, old relationships rekindled. And as you talk, give thanks to God for all of those blessings, and then give thanks to the people through whom God worked to bring you those blessings.

Tell them about it, tell God and tell each other and celebrate the victories.

Then you can go to the hard stuff, the illnesses, the rejections, the failures, the betrayals of trust, the deaths, the shattering of confidence, the loss of affection from those whom you loved, the breaking of promises, the constant pressure of jobs that once were meaningful and fulfilling and now are empty, soul-numbing necessities that bring no pleasure. Give thanks to God for getting you through those valleys of the past year, and then give thanks to the people who have, in the words of REO Speedwagon, been "a candle in the window on a cold, dark winter's night".

Tell them about it, tell God and tell each other and learn from the losses and you will discover that it has been a very good year.

How do I know that? Well, because I've got enough years in to realize that every year has its blessings, every year has its sorrows, and every year has God with us so every year goes into the books as a victory for those who have seen God.

I've always been influenced by Robert Redford in the 1973 movie, *The Way We Were*, who near the end, is asked by his friend to name the best year of his life as they

sail on their boat. Redford replies, thoughtfully, “Best Year? 1945. No, ’45, 46, 47 . . . “ and the scene fades away with him still listing the years.

Use this week to measure your year, our year together, what we have done and failed to do, not only in the broad and dramatic moments of the year gone by, but in the small and quiet and sacred moments, with the small and quiet and sacred people of God.

'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

And then turn the page and look ahead.

There is a new year coming, a New Advent, a New Christmas, a New Epiphany, a New Lent, A New Easter and a New Pentacost.

They will all be decorated with the things of every year, but the contents will be different, the applications will be different, the challenges will be different, even the victory will be different.

Be thankful for that!

And you can't be thankful for it if you aren't looking for it with anticipation.

I don't know where God will be this year, I don't know what challenges and opportunities we will find. In fact, if I am reading the story that Jesus told correctly no one knows, that strange business of the sheep and the goats, whatever else you might think it means, it certainly means this: nobody knows! The sheep and the goats alike were saying “When did we see you Lord . . .”

This is the heart of the story for me, as I look ahead at a new year: One group did the right things to Jesus, the other group failed to help Jesus, but neither realized it.

There is, in the budget that we will present to you in little while, there is a line item, under Mission, labeled Contingency. We never allocate an amount to that, for that is used for the unknown things that lie ahead: a hurricane, an earthquake, a fire. We hear of the need, we share the news and we respond with whatever God sends us through you. We don't know where God is going to use us, but we put that line item in there because we know that God will use us.

That which lies ahead is equally unknown. But we do know that where there is hunger, loneliness, sorrow and poverty, there is Jesus, identifying himself so closely with the pain of people that whatever we do, or fail to do, in relation to those hurting people directly affects Jesus.

Don't lose sight of that.

One writer put it this way:

Matthew tells us that when our lives include service and ministry and outreach to the downtrodden of life, then whether we know it or not, we are serving Jesus himself.

But if our lives are all about meeting our own needs, looking out for #1, and so doing little more than hoping that the poor, the sick, the impoverished, the imprisoned will find their own way in the world, then we are insulting Jesus just as surely as if we willingly spit in the Savior's eye.

'Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me.'

We don't know what the new year will bring us, we have some plans, we have some dreams, but I don't know.

My plans and my dreams have never, ever, worked out exactly the way I planned and dreamed them, so I'll be real surprised, and a little disappointed, if they suddenly do between now and Thanksgiving 2012.

But I am so grateful for the victories of the year gone by, we have done well as a congregation in all of the things that God has called us to do and to be.

And I am so grateful, in advance, for the victories that are inevitable, guaranteed by God.

And I am so grateful for all of you who show up and look around and give thanks and then make your best effort. As a result of your faith, your generosity and your commitment, the winning and losing takes care of itself, and in all of the things that matter – not money or fame or possessions or popularity – but in faith and trust and love and honor we will continue to win victories beyond any score, victories of life itself.

And the opportunities to win are around us, every day, even when we are completely unaware of them.

And the king will answer them, "Truly I tell you, just as you did it to one of the least of these who are members of my family, you did it to me."

To God alone be the Glory, today and forever. Amen
Clover Hill Reformed Church
November 20, 2011