

September 23, 2012

What does faithful living look like in our 2012 world? When we scan the TV channels they are full of people competing against one another singing, dancing, cooking, building, dressing, surviving... in sports of every kind. Can a Christian aspire to greatness, success, prizes or are we to blend into the background of our society? These tough questions form the core of our scripture readings today.

Psalm 1

In this psalm that serves as the introduction to the Book of Psalms, life is presented as a dramatic contrast between two ways: obedience and wickedness. It makes clear that life consists of choices. A productive, happy life is associated with wisdom grounded in a relationship with God. One wonders, though, if life is ever this black and white????

- ¹ Happy are those
who do not follow the advice of the wicked,
or take the path that sinners tread,
or sit in the seat of scoffers;
- ² but their delight is in the law of the LORD,
and on his law they meditate day and night.
- ³ They are like trees
planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.
In all that they do, they prosper.
- ⁴ The wicked are not so,
but are like chaff that the wind drives away.
- ⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous;
- ⁶ for the LORD watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.

Mark 9: 33-37

After spending an extended time with Jesus, the disciples began to display a new confidence. They even ventured to suggest that they were "great" compared to others. Their conversation was abruptly interrupted by Jesus whose response to them brought embarrassment and humiliation. While we might be quick to interpret this passage as a blanket condemnation of ambition in human endeavour, is that really a faithful reading? Think about your own experience of "getting ahead" or aiming high.

³³They came to Capernaum. When he was safe at home, he asked them, "What were you discussing on the road?"

³⁴The silence was deafening—they had been arguing with one another over who among them was greatest.

³⁵He sat down and summoned the Twelve. "So you want first place? Then take the last place. Be the servant of all."

³⁶He put a child in the middle of the room. Then, cradling the little one in his arms, he said, ³⁷"Whoever embraces one of these children as I do embraces me, and far more than me—God who sent me."

Hear what the Spirit is saying to the church.

THANKS BE TO GOD!

SERMON – "How can I compete at work, with my friends and still be faithful?"

How would you reply if your child or grandchild asked:

"If Jesus had been a basketball player, would he have charged someone in order to make a basket?"

or

"If Jesus lived in Winnipeg would he have lined up at Polo Park to get a new phone before anyone else?"

First question, in fact, prompted an extensive research study by Dr. Sharon Johnson, faculty of Business Administration, Cedarville University, a Baptist college in Ohio.

Study called: "Perspectives on Competition Christian and Otherwise."

She explores scripture – especially our gospel passage from Mark 9 – in the light of the teaching objectives and methods commonly used at every business school.

It must have been particularly disquieting for her that the motto of the college where she teaches is: "Inspiring Greatness"

Let me remind you of the key parts of each passage -> the passage sets out two ways of life – one obedient / one evil and tells us to stick with other obedient people in order to be happy and productive – in Jesus' encounter with the disciples, he squashes their conversation about greatness by telling them it is preferable to go through life with vulnerability and low status of children.

On the surface, it seems rather clear that competitiveness is out, if you want to be a good Christian.

This is where the ethical dilemma emerges for most of us – is ambition evil?
is aspiration unfaithful?

is wanting success always
wrong?
is winning un-Christian?

Are faithfulness and competitiveness doomed to be polar opposites?

Our culture is most assuredly a culture of competitiveness.

From the clothes and strollers we put our newborns in, to the houses we live in, the cars we drive, the trips we take.

TV is awash with reality shows that have winning as their central theme.

Usually winning at all costs – including humiliating opponents.

Just this week, the family of former Blue Bomber, Doug MacIver, announced that they had donated his brain to Boston University's Sports Brain Injury Institute and received word that he was suffering from significant sports related disease as a result of continuing to compete through headaches/concussions.

It was started by an article I read in the Huffington Post by a university counsellor, Sarakay Smullens: <http://www.huffingtonpost.com/sarakay-smullens/when-life-loses-me...>

There is one general theme in our society that I am told again and again by the young clients I work with which contributes to a/their feelings of doom and hopelessness. This theme is the obsessive need to Compete, which is sadly seen as synonymous with Winning... with being Crowned as Number One.

Some examples: the 20 year old Ivy League student turned down by the campus sorority of her choice, where all the "beautiful winners" are, and who came to my office labeling herself a "complete loser and misfit;" the seventeen year old prodigy who arrived at college to find that there were others with even more brainpower than his own, and who told me, "I am a nothing if I am not number one;" and the struggling student "ashamed to admit" that he needs to help. Why? "Because in this world, not being the best means you are trash."

What does all of this talk of Balance have to do with the stress of Competition, the notion drummed into our kid's heads from Minute One in their lives that they have to be the Best, the First, the Greatest? Here's what! There is only one kind of healthy Competition. It is a determination to do our very best, and learn from our mistakes without gauging achievements by how others are doing... without feeling "less than" when another achieves differently (seemingly more) than we do. Our young people can best believe in themselves when they learn that life is a journey with twists and turns and that when one does one's best, cares well for oneself, and accepts that mistakes and failures are part of life, the journey in the long run will bring deep satisfaction and fulfillment.

Was this the message that Jesus was getting at?

In 1988, the 7th Day Adventist church adopted a study paper; "Activities With Elements of Competition: Perspective and Analysis."

They begin from the premise that in God's plan, there is no place for selfish rivalry – they promote cooperation and fun as worthy objectives of competition.

They go through how this plays out in sports, school and also in churches where we report our greatness by way of budgets, memberships, building projects!

They conclude that we must examine our motives in our quest for excellence.

All people have talents – some more, some less. God expects faithfulness in service regardless of talents or pay (Matt 20: 1-16). Even though talents are distributed differently, God expects individuals to develop what they have to the best of their ability; and they will be given responsibility according to their faithfulness. The Scriptures remind us, "Whatever you are doing, put your whole heart into it, as if you were doing it for the Lord and not for men, knowing that there is a Master who will give you your heritage as a reward for your service" (Col 3: 23, NEB).

Dr. James Webb is a life coach who wrote an article: "Can you be both spiritual and ambitious?"

Ambition is just the desire to accomplish a goal. And there's nothing inherently unspiritual about that. Ambition to do good is highly spiritual.

Mother Teresa was ambitious, but not for the sake of making a big name for herself. She was humble enough to accept that reality, she did what she had to do, and brought love and light to some very dark and loveless places.

Maybe the most unselfish, spiritual thing a person can do is to succeed at something so that they have the material, physical and spiritual resources to bring some light into the world.

Ambition and competition have become words like evil and greedy – full of negative connotations feeding into a black/white view of faithful living.

Greatness is more what you are able to accomplish: your own self-esteem.

your ability to raise others up.

your awareness of the common good and social justice.

your ability to promote health, well-being and happiness.

So, if Jesus was a basketball player, would he charge someone to make a basket?

COMPETITIVENESS by Lance Landall, who lives in Wellington, NZ – leads: Compassion Internet Church.

Our attempting to beat other folk in order to gain first place, is hardly to our credit, and not something that we should embrace. There isn't a doubt in my mind – no, for it's very clear to me that a win via someone else's loss is a hollow victory.

You see, such flawed success is dependent on someone's failure, friend, and such I wouldn't be proud of, and certainly wouldn't defend. For ensuring someone's loss by doing everything that you can to make sure that you win instead, isn't the hallmark of a man.

No, the competitive spirit isn't one that I'd foster, friend, for it is such a selfish thing, and who knows where it may well end? Such can bring out the worst in folk, both the competitor and fan, and hence those sad things that we've seen since competitiveness began.

Many have become distraught, depressed, and even very angry at their loss to someone else; thus upsetting friends and family. Yes, such loss can lead to jealousy or folk acting moodily, and there have also been times when some folk have acted grievously.

In such territory, the terrible *killer* instinct is seen, which is a clear indication that it is not a healthy scene. For anything that would fuel such, cannot be something that is sound, and hence why greed and corruption with competitiveness is found.

Yes, wherever there is competitive sports, aggression will occur, for by its very nature, competitiveness such will soon stir. After all, its object isn't friendship, but rather, rivalry, and hence why the desire to win can injure friendships rapidly.

Such also creates stress, physically and emotionally, which can clearly take a heavy toll, and so very pointlessly. Our body isn't meant for thrashing, nor our mind, I might add too, hence sooner than later, they may shout that such wasn't wise to do.

Just like we see with gambling, so many folk get hooked on winning, and naturally, their first flush of success, being the beginning. The adrenaline that flows from such, gives them an addictive rush, and euphoric at their win, words promoting such sports, quickly gush.

But just like coming off a drug, they soon find that there's a downside, for when others win instead of them, downward their emotions slide. But so sure that they will win again, or at least have a good chance, they're back for another fix, another win – yes, the gambler's dance.

Sadly, competitiveness is simply striving against others, that is, it's putting ourselves first, which simply selflessness smothers. Therefore, competitiveness is not a path that I would follow, for it's enslaving, addictive and flawed – in other words, hollow.