



WIN, LOSE OR DRAW?

JESUS' WAY OF CONFOUNDING THE TROPHY-CENTRIC WAYS OF THIS WORLD

*Last night, as I was sleeping,
I dreamt-marvelous error!
that I had a beehive here inside my heart.
And the golden bees were making white combs
and sweet honey from my old failures.*

Spanish poet Antonio Machado

Preface

At the Olympic trials recently held in Eugene, Oregon, sprinters Allyson Felix and Jeneba Tarmoh tied for third place in the women's 100-meter race. Even a high-speed camera that can capture 3,000 frames per second was unable to determine a conclusive winner. It seems they were *both* winners *and* losers.

The racing world was totally flummoxed and had no provision amidst all their rules and regulations how to handle such a situation. Never before had they been unable to determine the difference between a winner and loser. A draw simply wasn't acceptable, since only one of them could go on to further compete with the American team. A tiebreaker would be required either by a run-off, or a capricious coin toss.

In the trophy-centric world in which we live there's little alternative to either yet more competition, or allowing pure chance to decide the matter. Clearly it seems, winners win, losers lose, and there's certainly no such thing as winning by losing.

The previous *Words & Ways* commentary explored a foolish kind of confounding wisdom once espoused by the Galilean sage through his teaching, through the parables he told, and even the absurdity that seemed inherently present in so many of the so-called miracles he wrought. [See *The Foolishness of Jesus*] It is this same *Jesus tradition* that also proposes such counter-cultural notions that one can "win by losing," (Mk 8:35, and five other variations in the canonical gospels), and the "first shall be last" (Mt 19:30, 20:16).

Yet we seem to live in a time and place where we are repeatedly cajoled into believing it's *all* a race of truly Olympic proportions; with the constant assurance we can *all* be winners if

only we're the one who – given the opportunity -- just tries a little harder than everyone else to get ahead.

If you stop and think about it for just a moment, that's a puzzling equation, at best. Yet even in religious matters, righteousness can often seem a sanctimonious competition sometimes, and even salvation a prize to be won. Jesus had something to say about such perceived winners who have already received their "rewards." (Matt 6)

"I have finished the race," says the writer of II Timothy (4:7). "I have kept the faith." Yet how much of it is about some crown of everlasting glory and victory in it all? How much of it is instead about a kind of humility that might slow you down in an *other-centered* kind of way; even if it costs you the race and the humiliation of losing?

Everyone knows the fabled race of the plodding tortoise, who perseveres and reaches the finish line ahead of the swift-footed, self-confident and prideful hare. Conventional wisdom would suggest that cautionary tale alone should at least suffice to challenge our easy presumptions about how to tell a *winner* from a *loser*. But what if there's a little of *each* in each of us? Winner *and* loser?

If we can't all be winners all the time, then what is there to say about all of us occasional losers? For surely anyone who has lived long enough to number our days has known some very real, sometimes very painful loss. What do we do with those other contestants we find in this human race that just happen to be among the "last and least" among us? (Mt. 28)

Is there anything, or anyone, for whom we might be willing to drop out of the race? And by doing so, how could we possibly come in first?

Winners and Losers

“Those who try to win their life will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it.” Luke 17:33

My mate and I play games all the time. Not mental games, mind you. I know her well enough to usually know what she’s thinking, so I can usually fill in the blanks on her behalf if necessary. And she can read me like a book.

I mean board games, where I keep score, and she routinely questions my arithmetic skills. She’s fairly good-natured about losing; which is fortunate, since she loses more often than she wins. But if there was a trophy for good sportsmanship, she’d win hands down.

At the same time, we both know that out there in what is often perceived as the real world, gamesmanship is serious business. The competition is fierce, winning or losing is the name of the game, and it’s a blood sport.

There are unwritten rules and commonly expected prizes when it comes to winning. They are the accepted norms and values by which we most often collectively measure who are the winners, and who are the losers: more money, the most toys, fame, fortune, success, etc.

And there are also established rules by which you’re allowed to win, as long as everyone plays by the same rules; which deludes the populace into believing it’s a level playing field. Mitt Romney is a howling success story when it comes to winning. Bernie Madoff was once considered a big winner too. But now, as it turns out, he’s one of the biggest losers; serving a jail sentence so long it’d take him several lifetimes to even crawl his way back to the starting line.

This post-modern, high-stakes world in which we live still perpetuates the basic ways in which we’ve always defined and separated the winners from the losers. Everyone loves a winner. One of the most popular reality shows on television is *The Biggest Loser*, where the *winner* is the one who has *lost* the most. Poundage, that is. It seems to be the only way we seem to be able to get our heads around the idea of winning by losing.

At the very least, it’s all a contest. And, more often than not it is portrayed as a pitched battle. Just consider the common vocabulary used to describe just about everything. Pundits talk about those battleground states being contested in the presidential election

campaign, with the strategic deployment of war chests.

Or others redefine the meaning of military victory as winning the hearts and minds of the indigenous peoples on whose lands we feel justified to wage our own war on terror.

And obviously it’s the stopwatch-to-trophy scenario played out in the elimination rounds leading up to the international sports competitions about to get under way in London. It’s all a matter of who will win, and who will lose.

Who will win the White House? How will we win the latest American war abroad? Who will win the gold, silver and bronze? And who will pack their bags, retreat in defeat, or go home empty-handed?

The Battle Within, and Without

The ancient Olympic games were a series of athletic competitions and staged combat held between city-states. During the games, any conflict between the warring states was forbidden. Just imagine it, if you can. If ever there was a time when that Olympic torch should be lit and never be extinguished, perhaps this is it.

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Media coverage of the festivities about to get underway in London has been dominated by the failure to put adequate security in place. Meanwhile, residents living in apartment buildings near some of the venues for the games have complained about the missile batteries that have been placed on their rooftops, in a pre-emptive effort to ward off any possible terrorist attack from the air.

In fact, there’s been so much whining by the locals, some have suggested the IOC create a new category for competitive complaining. To quell all the grumbling, the mayor of London was quoted telling the disgruntled to “put a sock in it.”

Perhaps the local citizenry will let such understated British decorum prevail. But it is more than a little ironic that the modern Olympics will bring together the nations of the world to delineate the winners and losers within

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To be sure, no one likes losing. That's why motivational books on winning strategies abound: there's *10 Qualities of a Total Winner*, and *10-minute Toughness: The Mental Training Program for Winning Before the Game Begins*, and *The Psychology of Winning for the New Millennium*. It leads me all the way back to taking another look at the beginning of the first millennium.

The Biggest Losers

When the canonical gospels were written in the latter half of the first century CE, the world was at war; and those first followers of *The Way (of Jesus)* knew only failure and defeat as a result. The Empire had squashed the Jewish insurrection that began in 68 CE, and razed the temple in Jerusalem to the ground two years later.

For those early Jewish-Christian communities it must have seemed a double defeat. In the light of such a loss, the synoptic gospels in particular (Matthew, Mark and Luke) had striven to interpret – one might say “Christianize” – Jesus’ message as welcome *good news*. For them he was somehow the fulfillment of the long-awaited Jewish expectation of God’s decisive and victorious reign. Otherwise, the portrayal of Jesus’ crucifixion was the story of a double loser.

But with the good news of his “resurrection” came the decisive restoration of all that the law and the prophets had foretold. They laid all their bets on this dark horse to win. But how could a crown of thorns resemble a victor’s laurel wreath, and the cross of crucifixion a trophy?

Before their own humiliating defeat, the ecclesiastical establishment hadn’t gone along with such an upstart contender, of course; which made this post-season playoff that

resulted following the drubbing they’d endured by the Romans all the fiercer. So when the Jesus story was retold in all its variations by his adherents, at every turn Jesus was portrayed in pitched battle with the religious authorities of his own tradition. He was a competing threat to the status quo, and the prevailing power brokers.

But the institution always wins. The contest was rigged and the odds were stacked against him. Someone was going to lose, and the religious hierarchy had used their overwhelming power to win.

But now even those who had once triumphed over the condemned heretic were themselves the vanquished. In this context, one could imagine the gospel writers and their communities looking for whatever possible meaning there was still to be found in those proverbial sayings attributed to Jesus; about how one might still win by losing; or how the last and least could ever again hope to be first.

So they begin with such an aphorism as, “Those who try to make their life secure will lose it, but those who lose their life will keep it.” (Luke 17:33) And then they add their understanding of what it could possibly mean to follow the one who embodies just such an experience of loss and failure. They expand the original saying, interpreting it as “taking up the cross,” for “the sake of the gospel,” (those expanded versions in Mark 8:34-9:1 and Matthew 16:24-27), before the imminent final judgment eventually occurs (Luke’s context again 17:20-25). Those early losers readily took up what had always been the symbol of defeat, and made the cross of crucifixion their marching victory standard.

The call to discipleship -- essentially acting out the suggestion of actually giving something a try -- is linked to this crazy idea you can actually “save,” or “restore,” or “redeem” or “make whole” one’s self by losing one’s self to something greater than one’s self.

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The Bible is for Losers

The Bible is for losers, because it's their story. While most history books are written by the winners (and that goes for church history, as well as political history and military conquest), the Bible is infiltrated with subversive texts that not only expose the short-sighted, self-serving failings of the presumed winners; but time and again raise up the losers:

Paradise is lost. The exodus frees the losers, only to have them wander lost in wilderness. The Promised Land is won by other's defeat; only to have the winners defeated by yet others, and driven into exile. The whole prophetic tradition might be summed up with the unwelcome message those who thought they were winners have lost their way.

Richard Rohr puts it similarly when he writes,

The Bible is a most extraordinary text because again and again it legitimates not the people on the top, but invariably the people on the bottom—from Abraham to Moses to Jeremiah to Job to John the Baptist to Jesus. After a while you might get tired of the rejected son, the younger son, the barren woman, the sinner, the outsider always being the chosen one of God! It is the biblical pattern—which we prefer not to see. It takes away our power to exclude “the least of the brothers and sisters” because that is precisely where Jesus says he is to be found (Matthew 25:40).

Jesus was an itinerant peasant preacher who commissioned his first disciples -- who were often described as dullards -- to emulate his own shiftless existence; abandoning honest work and self-responsibility, in order to traipse from village to village, mooching off other's hospitality and peddling a message about a winning strategy for the meek and the weak. That peculiar form of winning evidently comes by way of loss, and victory by means of defeat.

But the Bible is for losers, because the biblical story is our life story.

Life is for Losers

Anyone who's been around the block more than once knows you win some, and you lose some. But if one merely concludes “well, that's life,” it's not just a matter of keeping score, in the hopes you'll win more than you'll lose.

At the heart of the gospel story is the assertion one cannot live life to its fullest until one is able to lose more than a little of that fierce, competitive edge, and more fully experience losing.

We might remember Paul's letters to some of the first emerging Christian communities were written before any of those gospels, where we find some of those real life “save-your-life-by-losing-it” reiterations. In Paul, one can already read in some of his writings the experiential reality he came to refer to as his living-by-dying, winning-by-losing message:

We are putting no obstacle in anyone's way ...: through great endurance, in afflictions, hardships, calamities, beatings, imprisonments, riots, labors, sleepless nights, hunger; by purity, knowledge, patience, kindness, holiness of spirit, genuine love, truthful speech, and the power of God; with the weapons of righteousness for the right hand and for the left; in honor and dishonor, in ill repute and good repute. We are treated as impostors, and yet are true; as unknown, and yet are well known; as dying, and see—we are alive; as punished, and yet not killed; as sorrowful, yet always rejoicing; as poor, yet making many rich; as having nothing, and yet possessing everything. [II Cor. 6:3-10]

In his latest book, *Reclaiming the Bible for a Non-Religious World*, John Shelby Spong deciphers Paul's realized experience:

Sometimes abundant life becomes possible only in confrontation and brokenness. Real pastoral care (as Paul attempted to do with the Corinthians) is not about helping another to feel good; it is about helping wholeness to be created. ... Wholeness is seen in the freedom to be, and in the ability to escape the survival mentality that inevitably locks us into self-centeredness. Wholeness is found in the maturity of being able to live for another by giving our love away. (pp.248-9)

Life as a Race to be won, or a River of Compassion in a World of Beggars

In the world in which you and I try to live our lives, who doesn't regard a beggar as a bum, a loser, one who represents utter failure and defeat? A beggar is one who has lost everything, including their pride and self-respect, and self-sufficiency. The successful scurry along canyon streets, passing those who've dropped out of the race and lie collapsed at our feet.

On the other side of the world, Buddhist monks are known as *Bhikkhu*, or *Bhiksu*, which literally means “beggar,” or more generally as “one who lives by alms.” Young and old, strong or weak, they throng the streets. Some of the young monks will not always live a monastic life. For many, it will be a rite of passage, a stint in community service, and experience to remember and carry with them in whatever subsequent walk of life they might undertake.

As holy beggars, the world of winners and losers is as much removed from their daily existence, as it is their spiritual consciousness. And it is also the same with those who not only greet them on the streets; but who regard them to be walking witnesses to the confounding notion one might win by losing. The encounter is an exchange that forever memorializes certain actions that would be totally alien to the competitive world of winners and losers: acts of generosity, compassion, humility.

In fact, in the daily ritual of offering a daily meal to these holy beggars, the giver is not permitted to touch them; not because they are regarded as unclean, but quite the opposite. They are *icons of lowliness*, to be respected and revered. When one offers them alms, one is required to bow lower than the beggar!

Author Pam Houston directs the Creative Writing Program at U.C. Davis. She recently contributed this stunning piece entitled, *Sunrise in Laos*, to a NPR summer postcard series. I include this extended passage, with the *double entendre* its message has for the series title, "Wish You Were Here."

Luang Prabang, Laos, is so close to the equator that daybreak happens at the same time each day. Also each day, a few dozen women set up rice cookers on small collapsible tables on street corners next to the more than thirty monasteries that grace this riverside town. If you get up with them and walk the silent streets in the misty Mekong predawn, you smell, under the sweetness of the frangipani blossoms, the thick odor of cooked starch.

I am a mountain girl, and my first love in Asia is the monasteries tucked between the snow-covered razor ridges of the high Himalayas. But I've been drawn south into these humid lowlands by the reported kindness of the Laotian people and the early morning ritual that is about to begin.

A rooster crows. A peacock screams. And then the bells of the monasteries begin to have their morning conversation.

When the monks come pouring down the stone steps of the prayer halls, they appear first as a river of color, a ribbon of saffron silk, shockingly vibrant against the chalky streets, the dusty footpath, the gray — almost mercuried — sky. All over Asia, monks wear robes the color of spices: curry, cumin, paprika. In Luang Prabang, every robe is brightest saffron, the cloth wrapped complicatedly around their torsos and hanging to their ankles, tied at the waist with a bright yellow sash.

As they approach it becomes impossible to distinguish one monk from another, hands clasped in front of the belly, echoing the shape of the wooden begging bowl they hold.

Like the Mekong they live beside, this river of men never stops moving; they pass in a quiet, contemplative gait that is two parts walking, one part floating. One by one they drift past the woman, who also keeps a kind of time with her motions: one large scoop of steaming rice into each hand-carved bowl, refill, release, refill again. Every monk bows to her deeply and moves on.

Every few streets the same thing is happening: different woman, different monks; same bright, graceful river passing in front of her. And again a few streets over, an unmistakable flash of color, and again, a few streets beyond that. This is what happens here every morning, 365 days, year in, year out.

The women up early, cooking in the dark, carrying their little tables in the milky first light. Then the monks, a small fire in the gray light, lighting their rice cookers, lightening their burdens.

The sun strengthens slightly. In an hour, the fog will lift and the heat will begin to press down. There is a flick of fire, a swirl of a saffron sleeve as a monk moves around the corner, back up the stairs and into the dormitory, like a magic trick of compassion, of generosity, of prayers offered and received.

Two Worlds, Two World Views

I am left with two contrasting images. One is this image of an endless river of saffron floating by with beggar's bowls outstretched, and women scooping rice. It is not a race. There is no starting gun, save the crow of a rooster's reverie. There is no finish line. There are no winners. There are no losers.

The other image is a stadium filled with runners at the mark, set to spring, set to win if they can, for as long as they can; as if their lives depended on it. A starting gun is pointed skyward; not unlike the missile batteries poised outside.

And I wonder to myself, who are the winners, and who are the losers? If it's a matter of win, lose or draw, how might we draw upon that alternative image to be found in our own tradition of the Galilean sage, and imagine a pathway instead of a race track; and any finish line left far behind?

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