

We Are The Champions

January 27, 2008

I'd like you to think about a seemingly pretty simple question for a second...What does it mean to be a champion? How do you measure it? Is it Winning the Super Bowl? Is it being the top salesperson in your company? Billing the most hours at your law firm...teacher of the year? Take just a second and write down a name or two of someone you consider to be a champion—got it? You don't need to share that with anyone unless you want to...

You know, I think many of us are conditioned to think about what it means to be a champion in a pretty narrow framework. In our society, most often, champions are measured by number of victories...even margin of victory. Who sold the most, who makes the most—those are the real champions, because after all, being a champion means you are the best at something. In the eyes of a majority of the sports world, Peyton Manning and Tony Dungy weren't champions until they won a Super Bowl last year. My guess is that the kids at St. Vincent's Children's Hospital—now named *Peyton Manning Children's Hospital at St. Vincent*—might have a different opinion. My guess is also that anyone who really knows Tony Dungy would say he is a life champion whether or not he won a Super Bowl.

Many of you know Doug Crusan. Doug and his wife Dianne serve on the hospitality team at Oak Hill. By most measures, Doug is a champion. While playing for IU, Doug's Hoosiers won the Rose Bowl. Doug also played for the 1972 Miami Dolphins team who went undefeated and won a Super Bowl. Now, I want to be clear what I'm about to say is my own opinion....here it is: In those days, in the 70s, being a champion and winning meant something different than it does today—the motivation for being a champion was much deeper. Doug and his contemporaries made a *decent* living playing football, sure, but nothing like today's players. My gut sense is that Doug and his teammates played more for the love of the game, and for the ultimate expression of teamwork. A super bowl victory would be great...but again I think there was a richer meaning of champion...

It is in that context that I read today's first Bible passage. I really believe it begins to point us toward what it means to be a real champion. From a story in Matthew, we find the disciples gathered around Jesus. Peter, one of the twelve asks what I think was probably a pretty fair question, he asks Jesus, "*We've given up everything to follow you. What will we get?*"

That's a fair question, right. The disciples, to follow Jesus, did give up everything...possessions, family. Wasn't it right for them to expect some kind of reward in return? I believe the answer to this question does, in

fact, point us toward what it means to be a champion. Allow me to create a little historical fiction here to help it come to life. Imagine the start of the Dolphins training camp in the fall of 1972—After a particularly grueling end of a two-a-day practice, the legendary coach of the Dolphins, Don Shula, exhorts his team...guys we have to work harder tomorrow—sacrifice, commitment—Fellas...to be part of this team, that's what it's all about—sacrifice and commitment to the team. I can imagine Doug, or one of his teammates saying, coach, We've given up everything to follow you. What will we get?"

Well, Jesus came up with something Peter didn't expect...when Peter asked that very question, Jesus said, "*Everyone who has given up houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or property, for my sake, will receive a hundred times as much in return and will inherit eternal life.*"

Likewise, my guess is that Don Shula didn't say, guys, if you commit to practicing hard, it will mean a multi-year contract, untold millions, endorsements and fame. No, I don't imagine that at all, I imagine the old coach saying something to the effect of...Guys, if you are willing to make this commitment, I can't promise you anything material—I can't promise wins, fame, or fortune. What I can promise though, is something lasting that no one can take away from you...ever. I'll promise you a group who will become like your new family and friends for life—I promise a sense of belonging that no victory, no paycheck, no TV commercial will ever produce.

And, that is exactly what Jesus was promising the disciples. Jesus was saying, in return for making a life commitment to follow me, I will promise you something far greater than you can possibly imagine. For me...it is in this *following* that we start becoming real champions. When many of us hear this phrase *follow Jesus*...we can get turned off...maybe a little uneasy.

But what does that really mean? I take it at its most simple translation...actually follow me. Follow me, learn from my example, and then go do what I taught you...GO DO. And just what is *that*? What is *go do*? The most critical lesson Jesus taught the Disciples wasn't about what to believe or not believe—it wasn't about correct doctrine. In my own words, I think it was about how to live like a champion by setting appropriate priorities in life—It was and is about valuing what Jesus valued. We find these values in Jesus' Sermon on the Mount, verses many of you may be familiar with...Jesus taught

'Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

'Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted.

'Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.

'Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled.

*'Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.
'Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God.
'Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called
children of God.
'Blessed are those who are persecuted for
righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.*

I don't think we often associate being meek, merciful, pure, or being a peacemaker with being a champion. In fact, I think it is almost the antithesis of what we might expect. However, as people of faith, being a champion means something radically different. There is no faith tradition of which I am aware that this radical message...this reordering of priorities is very much different. No matter to what faith tradition we belong a reordering of priorities to tend to the sick, the poor and the hungry is common.

So today, in the midst of Super Bowl championship that is why I point back to the real reason I believe Peyton Manning is a champion...He was a champion before he won a super bowl...and has always been a champion off the field...Listen to what Peyton Manning said...

"In the NFL, the name on the back of the jersey is emblematic of a player's commitment to contribute in any way he can to the success of that team,"

"For me, having my name on the front of this building carries with it much the same—a weighty responsibility to contribute to the many victories ahead here at St. Vincent."

And, perhaps his father, Archie Manning summed it up best when asked about being proud of his son:

"I think a lot of people, from a distance, think you're proud because he threw so many touchdowns or he won a Super Bowl," the elder Manning said. "I think when you give back and help other people and better other people's lives, as a parent, there's no more pride than what that gives you."

As a parent, as a friend, or any relationship, I believe that is when we are the proudest...when we see our loved ones acting like champions in life...in fulfilling our commitment as people of faith to give back and help other people and better other people's lives.

A couple of years ago I had been selling these beaded pins that a group of HIV+ women in South Africa had made by hand to help raise money to support themselves and their families.

This particular group of women was a group of committed, faithful wives who had been turned out on the street by their husbands for having AIDS...when it was the husbands that brought AIDS into the house! Anyway, I had done quite well. I had sold 400-500 pins at \$5 a piece on a Sunday over at St. Luke's. I was at

home later in the day counting the money. I had this huge pile of crumpled dollars, five...tens...twenties.

Well, I was feeling mighty full of myself, when my daughter Annie walked by and said, "Daddy, can I have a dollar?" No sweetie, this money is for our friends in Africa who have AIDS. "But Daddy, I only need one more dollar and I can afford the new Barbie I want." You can imagine my disappointment, distress and complete deflation. What Have I done here...what kind of father am I...what kind of lessons have I taught my kids. The continent of Africa is withering away and all my daughter can think about is a new Barbie!

Well several minutes passed and Annie showed back up at my desk. In her hand she had a five dollar bill, and she said to me, "Daddy, I want our friends in Africa to have this...I don't need the Barbie."

You know, in the scheme of things, maybe that's not quite as big as having her name on the front of a hospital, but in my book she's every bit as much a champion. And it *is* the smallest of things we can do to be everyday champions.

The common denominator of being a champion in God's eyes is as Archie Manning said, *"I think when you give back and help other people and better other people's lives."*

- When you forgive...you are a champion.
- When you love unconditionally...you are a champion.
- When you are merciful...you are a champion.
- When you are a peacemaker...you are a champion.

CLOSING:

To paraphrase Jesus... *"Everyone who has given up houses or brothers or sisters or father or mother or children or property, for my sake...is a champion."*

My prayer this morning is that each of us finds a way to become everyday champions.

Have a great Sunday, Go in peace. AMEN