

“Winner Take All” February 1, 2009

Here we are at Super Bowl Sunday, and I suspect most of us are more than a little disappointed that our Colts are not back there, vying for the championship. We may still be reeling from the loss to the Chargers a few weeks ago, as all our hopes of another trophy were dashed.

Watching or playing in athletic competitions seems to garner most of our attention a lot of the time. I don't know exactly what it is—the thrill of the competition? Winning? Is it the thought that if we win, we're better than anyone else? Does it have something to do with the fact that, when we win, someone else loses? What is it about winning that so enamors us? What makes a winner?

I would guess that most of us agree that it's a lot more fun to win than it is to lose. In fact, I have to admit that I finally gave up playing tennis because I got tired of being a good loser. There's something about losing consistently that has a way of making a dent in our self-esteem, so maybe we choose to let it go, and give something else a try.

We probably all understand what it means to win, but just for the record, I thought we should be on the same page when it comes to what we're talking about. Dictionary.com defines the verb “to win” this way: “to gain a victory, be victorious, triumph; to finish in first place in a race, contest, etc.” The competitive nature that's part of many of us really likes the idea of being first, ahead of all the others, better than others, at least in one part of life.

However, part of the problem we get into, I think, is being so consumed with the hunger to win that it's win at all costs. Nothing is too costly when it comes to winding up on top, even if it means playing dirty or cheating, or anything else it takes. In fact, many competitors buy into the philosophy that was supposedly endorsed by Vince Lombardi, the one-time coach of the Green Bay Packers. He said, “Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing.”

Is that true? Is that all that really matters? I doubt that you'll be surprised to hear me say that I don't think so. Winning is not the only thing, nor even the most important thing. Sure, winning gives us an incredible high! Years ago, Mike and I were in Philadelphia when IU won the NCAA basketball tournament, and I can tell you that that experience was an exciting, thrilling time! And think back to how exciting it was in our city when the Colts won the Super Bowl. Winning is fun—there's no doubt about it.

However, there's certainly a downside to holding the philosophy that winning is the only thing and what it's all about. That way of thinking fosters a kind of competitiveness that can be very destructive of friendships, of self-concept; it can even lead to being very hurtful to our fellow human

beings. Healthy competition is one thing, but winning at all costs exacts an incredible toll. All we have to do is look at some of the Wall Street uppity-ups to see how their attitudes have destroyed trust in many of our systems and institutions at the very core of our society.

How might we come at this whole thing a different way? Someone by the name of Mike Bellah shared a story that might give us a hint. He talked about a 1993 book by Howell Raines, a Pulitzer Prize winner and editorial page editor of *The New York Times*. Raines wrote a book entitled *Fly Fishing Through the Midlife Crisis*. In the book, Raines reported that he once kept a fishing log where he recorded the numbers and sizes of his catch. Then one day, a mentor and friend challenged him on that, saying, “I don't believe in keeping count. If you're going to keep score you might as well be on a golf course.”

Raines reported that he thought about his friend's advice, and began to consider what it might be like if he focused, not on actually catching the fish, or landing it, but simply on trying to prevent it from breaking the line. According to psychologists, Raines discovered what is called the value of process. It's like something Dr. Daniel Levinson wrote in *The Seasons of a Man's Life*. “A man may continue to seek excellence, but he gains more intrinsic enjoyment from the process and product of his efforts and he is less concerned with recognition and power.”

What would it be like, I wonder, if we tried to minimize our emphasis on winning and keeping score, in whatever way we do that—awards, recognition, salaries, looks, material possessions, and focused on being able to celebrate the very process of living itself, not trying to be first, not trying to beat out someone else, not stepping over or on anyone else on our way to the top? What might happen if we did that? Might we find more joy and meaning in life? I don't know for sure, but I have a hunch we just might.

You see, in many ways, when we reduce our focus on winning, we start to re-define what being a winner looks like. Maybe being a winner isn't about always being on top, because the reality is that no one wins 100% of the time. I'm of the opinion that we learn just as much, maybe even more, from falling short, than from always being number one.

Maybe we become a bit more realistic and down to earth; we can let go of any pretenses we have about being flawless. We might even find ourselves sleeping better at night, not having a guilty conscience about a little misstep here, or a flagrant foul there. I really believe the real winners are those who know how to persevere and behave with dignity, regardless of whether they win or lose. A real winner is someone who has the courage to do the right thing, the decency to behave in a way that's consistent with the highest values, and the integrity

live out those values in a way that engenders trust. That, to me, is a winner.

When we play the game, whether it's a sports competition or whether we're engaged in the game we call life, the way we play it makes all the difference. It was someone by the name of Grantland Rice who said, "**For when the One Great Scorer comes to mark against your name, the Scorer writes not that you won or lost—but how you played the game!**" It's how we live our lives—the very process of our living is what it's all about. The real winner in life is the one who lives with honesty, integrity, courage, decency, loyalty.

In many ways, that's what our Bible passage for this morning is saying, too. It reads like this: "**You've all been to the stadium and seen the athletes race. Everyone runs; one wins. Run to win. All good athletes train hard. They do it for a gold medal that tarnishes and fades. You're after one that's gold eternally.**"

Yes, there are those who go for the gold, so to speak, and gain the equivalent of medals that tarnish and fade. But at what cost glory? Seeking that which has eternal qualities is seeking that which really counts—it's valuing people and relationships; it's keeping life in the right perspective; it's really keeping first things first; it's in the learning and growing and becoming better persons.

You know, not long ago, someone lamented, "Nice guys finish last." This was a person who was in a really down place, looking around at people around him, thinking they were the real winners. I don't know that I was at all helpful, but I tried to let him know that I didn't agree. You see, I believe being kind, being nice is the most important thing—not all the stuff we gather and collect. Nice guys, ultimately, finish first when it comes to the game of life. As Addison Walker once said, "**It's not true that nice guys finish last. Nice guys are winners before the game even starts.**" And I agree 100%!

So, where does that leave us today? The Colts are obviously not playing in the Super Bowl; they're not going to win the championship trophy this year. Are they losers, or are they winners? I would say to you that I think they're winners, and I'll tell you why. They're winners in the grace they show under pressure; they're winners in the way they represent our city; they're winners because they live and play with integrity; they're winners because they have had a coach who modeled humility and integrity, and we anticipate the same from our new coach; they're winners because they're part of an organization that expects the best in terms of human behavior and will not tolerate anything less. I'm proud of our Colts for who and what they are on the field and off.

But the real question is for us to answer? How are we when it comes to being winners? Do we try to win at all costs, or are we seeking after those gold medals that have eternal qualities? I guess each of us has to answer that for ourselves.

Closing:

Someone named Lane Kirkland once said, "**Don't believe that winning is really everything. It's more important to stand for something. If you don't stand for something, what do you win?**"

As we leave here this morning, I hope and pray that you and I stand for all the good things that make us real winners!

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.