

Winning
April 28, 2019
Psalm 118:1-29
First Presbyterian, Luling

I am about the least sports-minded person you can find. I am competitive in other ways, but I'm not competitive with sports. It just doesn't interest me in the least.

So—apologies to the Longhorns in the congregation--it's hard for me to understand the life of a die-hard fan. It's hard for me to identify with that community spirit. And it's hard for me to think in terms of sports metaphors, which are often popular with other preachers. Even the New Testament uses track events to explain the life of faith.

It's even hard—not hard, exactly, but it doesn't come naturally—for me to talk in terms of victory, or in words like winning and losing. One of the traditional phrases we use to explain the resurrection is that Jesus brought “victory over death.” Which doesn't really speak to me, for several reasons. For one, I wasn't aware that we were in some kind of battle with death. If we are, we are continuing to lose. People die. People we love die. All the time, every day, in expected ways and unexpected tragedies. If we are in some kind of competition with death, we aren't doing so well. Even Jesus died, right? And if the resurrection is a victory over death, I can see that it was Jesus's victory over death, but I have a hard time seeing that we are also victors, most days.

This Psalm uses those terms, uses terms of victory over enemies and deliverance from death. It's a great psalm. It includes some of the most famous verses of the psalms: this is the day that the Lord has made. Let us rejoice and be glad in it!

Opinions on the origin of this psalm are kind of all over the place, but there is a consensus that it was likely used in a setting of worship, that it likely celebrated the victory of a king over some powerful enemies, that those enemies are still threatening, since it asks for God's continued protection. It is also one of the psalms most frequently quoted in the New Testament.

I imagine these verses sounded familiar to you: “The stone that the builders rejected has become the chief cornerstone.” The New Testament repeatedly uses this verse to describe Jesus, the crucifixion, and the resurrection. The gospel of Matthew, the book of Acts, the letter of Ephesians and 1 Peter all reach back to

this Psalm to help them in understanding what happened with the crucifixion and resurrection, to help them make sense, theologically, of what occurred.

Putting this verse into its context of a hymn of victory gives us some food for thought. Victory comes from God, the Psalm tells us. But it sure sounds like rejection comes before victory. It sure sounds like the chief cornerstone only became the chief cornerstone because God picked it out of the builders' reject pile. The winner was first a loser, surrounded by more losers. The one who triumphed over death was first defeated by death.

This picture of a winner, of a chosen one who lives in victory, is a bit different from the way we view sports stars or champions. A winner who is really a loser is the one who is chosen for the most important role in a building. It starts to mix up all our understanding of what is winning, of who is a winner, of what is losing and who is a loser. It makes the losers more important, if that's the group that God is going to choose from. It makes the first last and the last first, in the words of that rejected stone.

I came across a couple of sports stories, one that is a few years old—I keep a file on my computer of stories that might make a good sermon someday.

The first is from 2008, a college women's softball game between two teams that weren't very important, a game that wasn't very important or consequential except to the people playing it and their fans. As people do, the young women and the fans were intent on their team winning and making it to the conference championships. It was especially important to the seniors on the teams, neither of which had ever made it to the playoffs. So of course they wanted to end their college careers on a high note.

A Western Oregon player hit a home run, the first ever home run of her college softball career. The crowd went wild. She started around the bases, the other two runners on base crossed the plate to score two runs. In her excitement, she didn't touch first base, but she realized it and turned back to touch the base. When she did, she tore ligaments in her knee and fell to the ground.

Here's where my softball rules knowledge needed some help. She was the only player from her team out on the field. If anyone had come to help her, they would have forfeited the hit and disqualified her home run. The umpire told the coach that the only thing they could do was replace her with a pinch runner at first base, but it would be recorded as a single instead of a home run, and the two other runners would have to return to base. They were stuck with that as their best option. The player was in obvious pain and couldn't walk the bases herself.

That's when a player from the other team spoke up: "can we carry her?" This other player was also a senior and realized how much a home run would mean to the injured player. The umpire agreed, and two opposing players carried her around the bases, letting her down to touch each, so her home run would stand. They all got a standing ovation.

Western Oregon, the injured girl's team, ended up winning the game by two runs, runs that counted because of the other teams' generosity and sacrifice. Here's what the Western Oregon coach said after the game: ""It kept everything in perspective and the fact that we're never bigger than the game. It was such a lesson that we learned -- that it's not all about winning. And we forget that, because as coaches, we're always trying to get to the top. We forget that. But I will never, ever forget this moment. It's changed me, and I'm sure it's changed my players."

So who really won? What was winning really about between these two not very important teams, stones in the pile that have been rejected, so to speak? Winning was looking out for the opponent, for putting yourself in someone else's shoes, for helping out someone who was in pain. Winning ended up looking a lot like losing. Losing the game, but winning something bigger.

The other story is from 2013. Two El Paso high school basketball teams received free tickets to watch the NCAA Sweet Sixteen. Why? Because they didn't care about winning, either one of them. Well, they did. They are cross-town rivals and successful basketball programs. They play each other every year, and it's always an intense game.

This is a story from the Dallas/Fort Worth TV station, where the playoff games were that year.

No matter how close the game got, Coronado coach Peter Morales had already decided how it would end: with senior Mitchell Marcus making his first shot.

"I wanted to surprise Mitchell with the last game of the season," Morales said. Mitchell Marcus has developmental disabilities. He's the trainer, not a player. But no one is more devoted.

"Mitchell will text me before every game and tell me, 'Coach, we've got to do this today. Coach, this is the key to victory,'" Morales said. "Just an amazing guy who deserves a chance at life." So for senior night, he suited up. And with a minute-and-a-half left, he went in.

Coronado was up by 15, but Franklin High School played hard. Over and over, Mitchell's teammates got him the ball. Over and over, Mitchell missed. With seconds ticking away, the other team, Franklin, got the ball. "And I'm like, '10

seconds to go and this kid is not going to get his moment -- not going to get to score," coach Morales said.

That's when Franklin's (the other team) Jonathon Montanez surprised everyone by in-bounding the ball to Mitchell, instead of his own team.

With fans on both sides screaming his name, Mitchell scored. "It was amazing," Mitchell told us. "I wanted to play my last game. That was my dream come true and it did."

Montanez said he was taught to treat others the way he would want to be treated. "I just thought it was the right thing to do at the right moment to give him the ball," he said.

Winning the game was out of reach for Franklin High School, so in that respect, it didn't much matter if they made one more basket or let Mitchell try again. But it mattered very much to Mitchell. And it mattered very much for the high school player who made that decision. Winning something else entirely, by giving someone considered a loser another chance, a chance to be a winner. And the coach, who had decided before the game started that he would give Mitchell that chance. Winning the game was less important than the joy of someone else.

So the non-sports preacher has now told two sports stories. I hope I haven't exposed my ignorance of softball or basketball too much. These two stories to me, give us a glimpse into what victory means, what winning means, when we look through God's eyes.

Winning does not happen if it is only for one person. Winning, real victory, doesn't happen if it makes one side into a loser. If us winning requires someone else losing, then it isn't really winning at all, because we have lost our humanity, lost our sense of compassion, lost our ability to stand in someone else's shoes.

In this kind of winning, real victory, we see how Jesus' victory over death was real winning, because the cross showed us his compassion and humanity. In his death and resurrection, he did not win for himself, but for us all. Though we may not always be able to see or understand that victory, it makes it no less real. Though we may be Thomas, demanding proof, demanding to touch and see and feel and believe victory, that victory is Christ's own, and our own.

In defeat, in losing, in being rejected and killed, and then in being raised up, Jesus won, for us all. A different kind of winning which brings victory to us all.