

LOSING CAN BE WINNING

Superbowl Sunday is coming up!

After that we'll have March Madness, then the NBA championships and then the baseball season and the race to the pennant and the World Series.

Then it'll be football season and we can get excited all over again.

To fill in any dead time along the way there will be golf tournaments, tennis tournaments, NASCAR and, for those who long to see blood, cage-fighting !

Let's face it: sports is our national religion and winners are the gods we worship.

We've built shrines to them at Cooperstown and Canton and decorated them with icons and relics: the bat used by Hank Aaron to hit his 500th home run; the jersey worn by Rocky Bleyer when he caught the pass that won the Superbowl, the tape measure used to measure Mickey Mantle's 643 foot home run on September 1, 1960..

Names like Joe DiMaggio, Rocky Marciano, Jim Thorpe and Willie Mays have magic for us for one reason and one reason only: they were winners—and we worship winners.

There is no pantheon of also-rans, no temple where losers are worshiped

As a matter of fact it's just the opposite: one of the most demeaning things we can say about someone is to refer to him as a "loser."

We don't even pity losers—we just forget them.

Our society is not unique in this regard: athletic competition—and the worship of winners and contempt for losers that it breeds—goes back to the dawn of history.

The Greeks had their marathons in which the victors received crowns of victory—Paul refers to them in his *Letter to the Philippians*.

The Mayans and Aztecs had a ballgame where, as the legend goes, a member or members of the losing team were thrown into pits so that the spectators could watch them swim around until they drowned.

The Romans had the Circus Maximus where gladiators fought to the death and Christians were forced to fight lions with their bare hands for the amusement of bloodthirsty crowds.

Ever since the fall, man has had an insatiable desire to see people exalt themselves by defeating one another in contests—by becoming winners at the expense of losers.

The value of this enterprise is never questioned, except, of course, on the occasions when fans become overexcited and join in the competition by hurling things down on the field or beating each other up.

But even after those mishaps, it doesn't take long for us to get back to business as usual.

We all just take it for granted that winning, as Vince Lombardi famously said, is not everything—it's the only thing.

It is no wonder, then, that ancient Israel expected the coming Messiah, her deliverer, to be a winner.

There were two schools of thought about how the Messiah was going to win.

One group (should I say “team”?) of rabbis believed that Messiah would come as a warrior prince like David who would conquer Israel’s enemies and re-establish its empire.

The other group expected Messiah to come as a divine judge who would punish Israel’s enemies for their wickedness and restore the Israelites to their appropriate station as God’s “chosen people.”

Whichever expectation proved right, Israel would be the winner and her enemies the losers.

Therefore the Israelites ignored Isaiah’s prophecy that Messiah would come neither as a warrior prince nor a divine judge, but as a suffering servant who would be “despised and rejected by men.”

In other words, as what the world calls a “loser.”

Israel didn’t want to hear that and we don’t like to hear it either.

But in today’s *Old Testament* lesson from the *Book of Isaiah*, that’s exactly what we do hear.

“He was despised and rejected by men, a man of sorrows and familiar with suffering. Like one from whom men hide their faces he was despised and we esteemed him not.”

Can this be the Messiah?

God himself declares that it is so.

“Kings will see you and rise up, princes will see and bow down, because of the LORD, who is faithful, the Holy One of Israel who has chosen you.”

This is the Messiah alright, for “messiah” means “the chosen one.”

And, according to Isaiah, when he arrived it would not be only as the savior of Israel, but of all mankind.

God says: *“It is too small a thing for you to be my servant to restore the tribes of Jacob and bring back those of Israel I have kept. I will also make you a light for the Gentiles, that you may bring my salvation to the ends of the earth.”* (Isaiah 49:1-7)

Now there can be no doubt as to who this servant is: he is Jesus of Nazareth, the Lamb of God who takes away the

sin of the world—the Savior who would bear men’s sins to the cross and take them with him to the grave.

Jesus, the loser of all time, who entered no competitions, won no trophies, ran no company, accumulated no wealth, and who died naked and penniless.

Jesus, whose gifts of healing earned him the hatred and contempt of his own people; whose first sermon in his home town almost got him thrown off a cliff; who was hounded from town to town, plotted against by his professional colleagues, targeted for assassination by the religious leaders of his day, betrayed by one of his closest friends, and then tortured and crucified to appease a mob that was howling for his blood.

Paul summarized Jesus’ life very simply: “*He made himself nothing.*” (Phil. 2:7)

That’s not the kind of career that gets your picture on the cover of *Newsweek* or *Sports Illustrated*.

Though He was the Man of all time, he would never have been selected to be *Time Magazine*’s “man of the year.”

Magazine covers are reserved for people who have made something of themselves—not people who have made

themselves nothing; people who have earned the world's respect rather than their contempt.

In short: winners, not losers.

And so all our lives we are driven to win.

When we were kids we wanted to have more toys than our friends.

When we were teenagers, we wanted to be more popular than anyone else.

When we became adults we wanted to have bigger houses and more prestigious jobs than anyone else.

And when we go to our graves toyless, carless and homeless, we will be just as dead as the losers who had nothing.

And what difference will all our winning make then?

Sometimes the meaninglessness of winning becomes apparent even before the end.

In a survey of fifteen female CEO's of Fortune 500 companies the participants were asked if their success had made them happy.

All fifteen said that they would trade everything they had for one good relationship.

One good relationship.

Shouldn't that tell us something?

Shouldn't that give us cause to examine the proposition we hold to be axiomatic: that winning is more important than anything else?

That it's "not the main thing but the only thing?"

Shouldn't it prompt us to consider the possibility that loving others and being loved by them might be a worthier goal than seeking competitive advantage?

That good relationships just might be more important than figuring out who is right and who is wrong?

That serving other people might bring us more joy than defeating them?

Winning has become our national idol and like any other idol, unless we demolish it, it will devour us.

Most of us aren't even aware of the fact that we have idols but we do, and they are our worst enemies.

For one man it may be the idol of rising to the top of his company.

And he sacrifices everything—his time with his family, his physical and emotional health—maybe even his integrity—to that idol.

Then, suddenly, he's fifty years old.

He's entered what's called "the danger zone" where he can be replaced by a younger, cheaper, more motivated person than he has come to be.

He realizes that he's not only not going to make it to the top—he may not even be able to hold onto the job he has.

And nobody cares about all the time he spent away from his family and all the crow he had to eat to get to where he is—which isn't much of a place to be anyway.

The world can seem very bleak to that man.

Or what about the woman who has done everything imaginable to preserve her youthful looks and begins to realize that she's sweeping water uphill: that time and age are going to win the battle no matter what she does.

These are real situations that real people find themselves in every single day.

You see, our idols don't just sit there and accept our worship—they turn on us and devour us.

In the end they reward us with the only things they have to offer—despair and death.

But idols have two mortal enemies.

Their first mortal enemy is the truth—the truth that God gives us through his Word, prayer and worship which exposes idols for what they are.

Their second mortal enemy is love: the love that we receive from God and from our brothers and sisters in Christ that empowers us to put God ahead of idols and puts other people ahead of ourselves.

Loving others in truth and action—all the time trusting God for the strength to persevere in doing so: no idol can stand up to that.

In other words, walking with God through a relationship with Jesus Christ, the suffering servant of God, the Lamb of God Who is the way, the truth and the life.

Cultivating a relationship with the Man of sorrows who was “...*despised and rejected among men*” and had “...*no beauty or majesty to attract us to him, nothing in his appearance that we should desire him.*”

We can rejoice and grow in that relationship or we can sink into despair and death in our idolatry.

If we choose a relationship with Jesus, however, we enter it on his terms.

He will lead us on a very different kind of journey than the one the prince of this world offers you.

The prince of this world invites you to get on board a train that is filled with all the things that this world has to offer.

But you won't like the destination because it's a hell-bound train.

Jesus, on the other hand, invites you to travel down a narrow road with him, a road that has few luxuries and at times brings trials and even persecution.

But each day you travel it you will be able to discern your destination a little more clearly than you could the day before.

It's destination is a place of indescribable joy, a place of pure truth and beauty and love, a place of justice and righteousness and peace which the Servant Himself has prepared for you to live with Him forever.

And when you look back you'll realize that the trip was not so hard after all.

After all is said and done, your yoke was easy, your burden was light and the troubles you endured were not worth comparing to the glory which awaited you every step of the way.

Then you'll be able to see with your eyes what you knew by faith all along: that what the world called winning was

losing and that by losing everything for Him, you came out the biggest winner of all.

Amen.