

“What Are You Here For?”

Rev. Dr. Scott Paczkowski

I'm kind of a sports guy and I read a lot when I get the chance. I was thinking about this week, and I was reading through information. I was intent on the sports thing on a Monday, because you have to find out how the Vikings really did on Sunday - rather than just the box score - because frankly I can't believe they are still undefeated. It's kind of shaking up my world and making me all discombobulated. But then I started reading through these different passages and the information that I received.

There seems to be this big debate apparently going on about youth and children's sports, whether there should be trophies for participation. At first I thought, "Well, that's fine. Why not? What is the big deal? Why are we having this big debate?" Then I started reading more and more, and I thought it was interesting. People were siding on the fact that you shouldn't have these participation trophies, because it just makes the kids feel like they are the center of their own universe, or that they never understand the difference between winning and not winning - to try harder when everybody is going to get the same outcome anyway.

Then I read another article by someone that said, "No. Your focus is off. It isn't about the kid getting a participation trophy, or not. It's really about the parents who always treat their children like trophies."

I thought, "Wow! That one was interesting." So I dug a little deeper. I wanted to find out why this issue seems to be burning so in the hearts of athletes right now.

In the micro, it's really not a huge problem if you give the child a trophy. It's not going to ruin their lives. But it does give them an over-inflated view of their own abilities, and you see that a lot now. I wondered what it was, that participation trophies were certainly not the only reason, but they are certainly an example of it.

When I was reading, it said, in the macro, participation trophies have more troubling consequences. They go on to talk about the idea that a child, if he or she is going to get the same award whether they work or not, isn't encouraging them to try harder. It confuses them about if you are going to get the same results, whether or not they really have a gift or skill or ability in a certain area, or if they should look somewhere else and find their area or niche in life.

If you are going to get the same award and get the same affirmation for everything you do, are we messing with our children in a negative way, because then they cannot truly evaluate their own abilities? They can't define for themselves who God has called them to be and what God's plan is for their life, when they keep getting the same applause, whether they stink or whether they are the greatest thing since sliced bread.

I thought, "Now that has some bearing. That is interesting." We need to affirm hard work a little more and, an honest idea: One's abilities need to be defined for our child to self-actualize and find out who they are.

Then I'm reading this passage for this morning and it ends with this verse: "We are worthless slaves. [Ouch.] We have done only what we ought to have done."

Now when you talk to teachers or people in the education field for more than about two minutes, you find out that they are frustrated with kids who think that the world revolves around them. They don't have to have discipline. They think that every little thing they do is the greatest thing in the world and they should get affirmation for it - every second of every day.

Here is Jesus saying the same thing to the Disciples, two thousand years ago. What the Disciples wanted was, "I want more faith." And Jesus saying, "It's not about you, Disciples. I have given you enough. All you need is this much [a pinch], the size of a mustard seed, which is the tiniest of seeds. That alone is more powerful than you can handle. It can make you change everything in your world; but you have to take the time. Devote the time and talent and energy and the discipline to do the hard work of learning how to use your faith to make a difference in your life and the lives of those around you, in your Church and in your world - and don't expect to get applause or affirmation every time you turn around.

"Disciples, you can do great things, but only if you trust and give God the glory and not yourselves. You will do more and get more when you treat your blessings like an everyday activity." If you have to do a victory dance in the end zone after every little thing you do, it is not going to work.

Now, when I was growing up I was about the worst football player there ever was. That's why I ended up running cross country - because I wasn't very good at hitting people; but I was good at running away from them. [Laughter.] But, in the short two years that I horrendously played football, we were taught that when you scored a touchdown (of which I never scored one - I caught one in the end zone and ran into the goal post, knocking myself cold and dropping the ball. Now for you who are under the age of 50, the goal posts used to be in the center of the end zone. Why couldn't they have changed it 5 to 10 years earlier and I would have scored a touchdown and not have long term issues with my brain?) [Laughter.] But, we were taught that you might be able to get away with a spike if it was great - but you don't do it near a ref, and you never show up your opponent.

Now days you dance, you wiggle, you gyrate - not in the end zone - but if you happen to touch the quarterback, who is already down, you get to do the gyration of a lifetime like you were the greatest thing in the world. The sad part is kids watch the pros and then they emulate it, and we have become so self-absorbed as a society. The kids have learned from us, so that any little thing they do, the teacher better darn well pay attention and celebrate them individually! If you have 35 kids in a class all you have time to do is celebrate and gyrate over each one's spelling a word right, and you never teach anything.

God wants us to be humble. You don't need more faith. God has given us all enough of that. What God needs from us is enough humility to think about those beyond ourselves. We stopped - somewhere along the line in sports - thinking about how our actions affect someone else. I tried just about every sport and never found one that I was good at but, by golly, I was in them all; and every coach, except one (but that is another story for another day), said sportsmanship was the priority. Act the way you want someone to act toward

you, when the shoe is on the other foot. That was the first thing on the first day of practice and every sport I did. It started with sportsmanship.

I wonder where we have gone? You hear athletes now talking about it - youth sports and children's sports - because even those football players that are gyrating around after every play are saying that it is too much.

The reason I'm saying so much about sports this morning is that I'm thinking it's also the way we react now in every other part of our lives. I gave you the example of school. Talk to teachers and see if I'm right or not. It happens even in church. Thirty, forty years ago we didn't have to do all that we have to do now to keep people invested in this place. People came because they knew that their faith was a priority and important, and they needed to be here.

I was joking with a minister who was retiring about 10 years ago, and I said, "Oh, man, I'm 40 years too late." He said, "Yes you are. You are good riddance." [Laughter.] And, I thought "that wasn't very Christian of you," but we were talking about the fact that it is getting harder and harder in this consumer-driven society to offer Christ to the world, because everyone wants something from God.

It used to be that you were giving back for everything that God has given you. Now, in this age of "me first" consumerism, and dancing around with all of my participation trophies it's, what can I get?

And, if the sermon isn't good enough I'll go somewhere else, so I can get what I want and need. If the budget gets reduced and something gets cut, then I go somewhere else because it's not about honoring God or my church family. It's about what I get and I need.

That shift, as subtle as it sounds, has changed the way the church is run, the word is proclaimed and people are treated. If you have to focus so much on what each individual gets in their piece of the pie, there is very little time and energy, money and interest, left over to give to everyone else on this World Communion Sunday.

We don't have time when we are busy celebrating everyone's little victory to focus on the gentleman I ride my bike past every day, on the trail towards Saylorville, who is sleeping under the bridge. We don't have time to focus on those people who have fallen through the cracks and haven't had the pastoral care that might lift them out of their malaise, their feeling of depression, and are crying out - because we have to focus on all of the individuals who are screaming their frustration because we aren't paying enough attention to them on Facebook. Where do we find the energy, when everybody is screaming?

That is what Jesus was trying to say to his Disciples: "It can't be about you. You are already with me. You have the Holy Spirit. You are here. God has given you everything you need." It is our task to give it away. To give a portion of our money. But even more importantly - no, I shouldn't have said it that way on Stewardship Sunday - but *as* important, to be able to set our minds on everyone who needs us.

My mother used to say, and she learned it from my grandmother: "Life isn't about how much you can acquire. What makes you happy, or what makes you rich, is how little you

need to still be happy.” All we need is something the size of a mustard seed, [Pastor Scott pinches his thumb and forefinger together] and it can bring us great joy. The rest we can give away - our time, our joy, our hopes, faith - we can give it away because it will always be restored to us. If you trust that God will give it to you again, every day, over and over again, you will never be forsaken.

And what Jesus told the Disciples that day was, “You never have to worry, I will never leave you. You can give as much of your time, your energy, your material wealth, as you can - give all of your spirit away and leave yourself empty when you close your eyes to sleep. In the morning if you give of yourself that sacrificially, I will fill you anew, so that you can do the same thing tomorrow. Then you will feel rich and whole. That is what this is all about. It’s not about what you can get, but how much you can give away; because no matter how much you get, it is never enough. But when you give it all away, you find true peace, true joy, can smile within, and give it away.

May God bless us as we try, in this difficult world, to give it all away.
Amen.