

Reflection: 'WHO IS THE GREATEST?'

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I remember hearing a story, I think it was in a sermon some years ago, about a mother who was preparing pancakes for her sons Kevin, 5 and Ryan, 6. The boys began to argue over who would get the first pancakes (sound familiar?). Their mother saw the opportunity for a moral lesson. She says "you know, boys, if Jesus were sitting here, he would say "let my brother have the first pancake, I can wait". Ryan thought for a moment, then turned to his younger brother and said "Kevin, you be Jesus".

A funny story, one that we can imagine happening. But isn't life a lot like that, really, about getting ahead? The Olympics so focus on Gold, that even Silver can seem a letdown, well, maybe only to some, but certainly the focus is on getting that medal. And in any of the World Series, what kind of credit did the teams get who did not make it into the finals, or the semi-finals? In the golf tournaments, do those who don't make it, say into the top three, feel like losers? Do we even remember the names of those who came in below those top three? I watch Jeopardy, and I wonder if the two who didn't make the top money feel like they have lost, rather than coming in second and third? It's all about getting ahead.

From my own family, I remember when my now grown up grandson, Dylan, was 10 years old, and was competing in a Go-Cart race in Kitchener. He had come from behind and was ahead to the very last turn, and then was overtaken by another driver. He was a very good second but, at the time, he cried because he had not come in first. Understandable, in a youngster, but I wonder how much of this feeling of failure is brought with us into older generations.

In all these examples, did the people concerned feel that they had 'lost' or that they had come in second or third in an important event. Had they 'lost' the World Series, the Green Jacket of golf renown, the big money in Jeopardy or, in the case of my young grandson, had he simply 'lost' the chance to be first, to be the winner?

Watching the current Olympic Games in Tokyo, are we so focused on the Gold medals that even Silver seems a let-down? Well, maybe not so much, but I did listen to an announcer with regard to Russian gymnast Nikita Nagornyy, who came in third - his comment was that Nikita had 'lost his chance to win'!

And recently, in a similar vein, as I watched the Royal Open golf championship in South England, an announcer made a comment about the golfer who was currently in

second place, wondering if he would 'lose' the championship, hence not being first, was to lose.

It's all about getting ahead, being first, being a winner!

But what is our mandate as Christians? What is being Christian all about?

I do not believe it is carving out a place in Heaven. Jesus clearly wasn't concerned about his place in Heaven. Jesus was concerned about loving his God and loving his neighbor. Being Christian is about responding in kind, to the wonderful way we have been loved. It's about hospitality, reaching out, welcoming, about being inclusive, not so much about what we believe, as about what we do and how we live. Isn't it? It's about tolerance, accepting other religions, other beliefs, for if you study comparative religions, they all have more in common than they have diversity. It's about accepting that we are not all made the same and that no matter our colour, our ethnic background, our sexual orientation, our religion, we are ALL made in God's image. In a world so much in need of more love, more understanding, more acceptance, there is no room for hate.....if only! Can't help but think of the words in the hymn *"and they'll know we are Christians by our love, by our love"*.

It seems to me that the world says we are to strive to be first, as individuals and as churches, to go for above market shares. Everyone else is to lose in the lottery, if we are to win. But Jesus says the first shall be last, and the last shall be first, and we know he's right even from our own experience. For most of us, I'll bet, recognize that our highs are not so much when we have financial or other good fortune, but when we can share it with someone. It's like the priest, and I'm sure some of you have heard this story, or is it a joke, about a priest who snuck out on a Sunday, when he should be doing what priests do on a Sunday, and who went golfing, and got a hole in one, but couldn't tell anyone. What good is it?

In our reading this morning, we hear how hard it is to find a capable wife! She is worth more than her weight in jewels! And these are the solemn words which King Lemuel's mother said to him, beginning *"you are my own dear son, the answer to my prayers. What shall I tell you?"*...and she goes on to give, at great length, a list of all the things a wife should do and be.

I think sometimes the virtuous or capable woman of Proverbs is looked upon as a bit of a patriarchal image of a woman slaving her heart out for her man. But might we not think of it is a wonderful image, not of a woman as a doormat, but of a visionary, caring, entrepreneurial woman who works very hard for the livelihood of her family, who develops very creative skills, who markets her product, who enjoys

life. She's not into charm but authenticity, she's not pretentious, no façade, but personal and real.

Jesus has always stressed authenticity. He uplifts the realness and authenticity of a little child...and, getting back to my earlier comments on winning and losing, of course we celebrate the medal winners of the Olympics, the golf champions and wisdom of the Jeopardy winner, and the driving skills of the Go-Cart driver. But surely we celebrate the more, all of those who trained for years to be good enough to represent their country, whether it be in soccer, or golf, or even in youthful Go-Kart racing? It wasn't just as a grandmother that I was thrilled when, in another race, Dylan got back in the race after rolling his Kart, and came in 4th out of 36. He could have come in last and I would still have been thrilled that he was able to finish the race at all.

But still, in our world, the emphasis is too much on winning.

So I would ask, why do we praise a Lord whom we might call the greatest who, it could be said, did not win, but was put to death? Could it be that because self-giving, investing in others, sharing values, dreaming of a whole earth, living love, is more soul-building than the self-oriented goals of the world and, indeed, all-too-often, of religion?

Again, the question - what is being Christian all about?

We each have our own answers, our own interpretation of what the Gospel means for us. We have to live our life in Christ in our own way. Times have been challenging in this past year or so, and we face more uncertainties as we move forward. We have our individual challenges, but we, as a community of caring Christians, are to do our best to respond as Christ would want us to.

In conclusion, I go back to my original question and the title of my sermon "**Who is the Greatest?**"

The one who proclaims, from the pulpit, God's word OR the one who regularly picks up a neighbour and drives them to the cancer clinic in Hamilton?

The one who owns the chain of doughnut shops OR the one who hands out free coffee to the bag lady who comes in once in a while out of the cold?

You get the picture - you just never know.

But I believe that in EVERY act of kindness, EVERY act of love, EVERY fight against injustice, we fulfill our destiny.

So what's our mission? To be the greatest? To be last? To be right? OR to take the risk of loving, to be a light to the world?

The thought I would leave with you this morning, you could call it your homework for the coming week, or weeks... mine too

As modern day Disciples of Christ, let us ponder what it means for us to be 'sent out' in Jesus' name... and as we do so,

God bless us....and make us a blessing!