

Winning on Paper

Mark 7:1-8, 14-15, 21-23

Sometimes spiritual truths come from opportunities that you don't expect.

Such an opportunity came when I helped Lynn make it to her first official high school teachers' function this school year. Two weeks ago on a Monday, the educators from Sun Valley High School had their orientation session for the ensuing year, held this year at South Piedmont Community College. Arriving at the building there was the promise of a buffet breakfast and orientation session for the morning by the new principal. To get to the right room, one needed to know which way to turn, so that I could help Lynn set up her oxygen needs for the morning's get-together. Removing the questions as to which way to turn, there was a teacher in the hallway who was motioning where the teachers were to go. The teacher was actually Coach Baucom, the head coach for the football team at Sun Valley High, complete with his iPhone, perennial toothpick in his mouth and comfortable coaching shorts. On the way in, to be social, I simply asked the coach how the team did the previous Friday night. His response was direct, with the words: "We won ... on paper."

How does a team win on paper? What does that mean? Isn't a win a win?

Not to him, the coach, who is charged with developing players to give their best every minute. Apparently the win was secured in spite of the performance of the team. Perhaps there was a lucky interception that snatched victory from the jaws of defeat. Maybe the opposing team fumbled the ball in the red zone, just as they were score the go-ahead touchdown in the waning seconds of the game. What might it have been? My guess, not having asked him what that evaluation meant, is that the team's performance dictated that they didn't deserve to win. They showed up and went through all the motions, but their heart wasn't in it, but their hearts were somewhere else.

And of course the reality is that if the team continues to play like that and just go through the outward motions...they will eventually get beat, and get beat again...and there develop a reputation for having nice uniforms and that is about it. (Apparently the coach was able to get the team to win their next contest, and fairly handily). But the team will have to keep matching their effort to their goals.

Neat metaphor, huh?

How far can we take it? Are there other venues of life that fall prey to winning on paper?

Politics come to mind, of course. One can keep up appearances only so long, and the true nature of what inside begins to surface. The emperor's new clothes, according to the Hans Christian Anderson story, can work only so long. You can fool some of the people all of the time, all of the people some of the time, but not all of the people all of the time, according to President Lincoln.

In the same line of reality, the Roman Catholic Church is dealing with things that cannot be hidden for ever. Allegedly, many priests were winning on paper, but that only lasts so long. They had been assuming that no one would find, nor would anyone be courageous enough to call attention to the evils. For leaders of the church, in whatever calling and denomination it may be, you cannot just win on paper, for the heart has to match the calling of Christ as best it can.

So what to do when the "coach," the conscience, the clear call of Jesus notes that things need to change, or an irrevocable day of reckoning arrives.

Well, it's more than just keeping your hands clean, apparently, according to the words of the Master. And I would bet that it is more than changing anything else on the outside that effects us. Getting right with God, if we dare use that phrase, is something we do from within. For there will be loads of remedies that one would think that makes things all better. Change the leadership perhaps, pastors, choir directors, priests, bishops, elders...other things that is. Change the scenery, in the hopes that it will change the heart. Use hand sanitizer. Eat with cleaner hands, that is. Change what you take in...garbage in, garbage out... you are what you eat. And on and on.

Sorry, but the change, with the guidance of the Holy Spirit, happens from within. The whole marks of righteous discipleship begins with the denial of oneself and then the cross and follower-ship. You can give a team new uniforms, but it only lasts so long. The real winning is not on the outside but from the inside of a heart given to God and not to appearances, traditions or what other people think.

And to that end, the corporate church must move ahead, and not just on paper, statistics and appearances. Which of course, begs the question to us, sooner or later. To be honest, we have noises in the nursery, money in bank, more butts in the seats...but are we "winning on paper?" Is there depth to our recent surge? Is their depth to our individual witnesses here and out there? How oriented are our hearts to the generous, patient, circumspect care for the other? If we really have our hearts in "the right place," so will our actions and words...so says Jesus.

Maybe it is as simple as monitoring your heart each day. Maybe it is as simple as the question Professor Bonhoeffer would ask himself each day: Who is Jesus Christ for me today? You ask that question daily and your heart may find itself focused and faithful...and not winning just on paper.

So know it's time to join in communion, knowing that some of may have hands that have been touching others, scratching our heads, and so on. But Jesus, in His fullest presence here, is not interested in how clean your hands are, but how much your hearts long to enjoy the grace given in this sacrament. Come, and join us at the Table. It might get a little messy, but it will be a holy mess.

In the name of the Father, Son and Holy Spirit. Amen.

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MorningStar Presbyterian Church
Fifteenth Sunday After Pentecost
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