



**LENT 5 C**  
**21 March AD 2010**

**Philippians 3:12-14**

*If athletic competition is a gift from God, a good that has mental, spiritual and physical health benefits; then it might do us good to view life, even congregational life as a race to the goal—eternal life in Jesus Christ.*

I think we can all agree. There are those whose preoccupation with sports is so all-consuming as to constitute sin. Let's be up front and clear, for some people sports is god, their idol—it's everything. They have no life, no identity apart from the athletic field. Also, a life lived in a sports bar is a life ill spent. A life spent on the field of competition to the neglect of family and the community is life and energy wasted. Some people put way too much emphasis on sports, on what is essentially trivial, a game.

And yet, there is a sense in which athletic competition is a gift of God—a gift rich in physical, mental and spiritual benefits. The competitive urge is part of our human nature, by it God means to help us prosper. The purpose of athletics is to help us to satisfy that urge in a healthy and ordered way. Competitive play teaches youth to work together as a team, toward a common goal, a community good.

I've heard stories on more than one occasion of people who have let their children or grandchildren win at games simply because they couldn't bear to see the tears. They do their children no favors. Life is not so easy. Learning to play and to lose is as important, if not more so, than winning. They tell of a seminarian in St. Louis who took his life; a model scholar, he didn't understand earning less than an A on an exam. We must learn to fail (or lose) with grace and dignity.

Competition is a good for us. When you're number two you try harder. We should give thanks for sports, games, and yes, even the Olympics. I say all of this fully realizing that athletics have never been my thing. I never enjoyed participation, I never became a fan in the bleachers. I never developed that regional pride people seem to take in their local team. For some the Yankees winning the World Series is a matter of life and death. In Europe people riot at soccer matches! After the last Olympics the Russians were really steamed by their athletes' performance. For me, it's just games.

Tim Rice's musical *CHES* is set during the Cold War. It is the story of a romantic

triangle between two chess players, an American and a Russian, and a woman who is the manager of the American but falls in love with the other. The drama of their life unfolds as if on a game board.

Games are a marvelous metaphor for life. Whatever your calling and station or your occupation in life, your game gives you a emotional outlet, a diversion and a way to bond with your neighbors and friends. The language of sport gives Paul a way to speak about the realities of the Christian life.

In order to win the competition Paul is willing to shed all the baggage that weighs him down and holds him back. *“Whatever gain I had, I counted as loss for the sake of Christ...”* In the language of Paul, knowing Christ Jesus is far more important than anything else he could boast about. He was willing to suffer *“the loss of all things and count them as rubbish,”* if that meant gaining Christ.

In life Paul could boast about the advantages he enjoyed. He was born of the tribe of Benjamin; that made him a Jewish blue blood, or at least put the family in Israeli social register. Paul was also born a Roman citizen. Not a day early or two days late, he was circumcised on the eighth day. He studied under the best rabbis. Not only was he a good Jew, observant and zealous for the traditions of his fathers, Paul was a member of that elite group, the Pharisees. Paul led them in the early persecution of Christians. All this he was willing to ditch in the race to God and eternal life. Whatever value such a pedigree gave him, he was willing to leave it behind because an athlete competes better unencumbered.

The writer to the Hebrews uses similar language. Remembering all the great saints, particularly of the Old Testament which were listed in the previous chapter, he suggests they are now on the sidelines cheering us on in the faith. *“Since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight, and sin which clings so closely, and let us run with endurance the race that is set before us....”* (Hebrews 12:1)

Any illustration can be taken to an absurdity, or used badly. I don't want you to conclude that God's gift of life is a win or lose proposition depending on how well you do. The gift of life, of eternal life, is for all who trust in Christ Jesus. Perhaps it's best if we think of this sporting event as a team effort. It does not depend solely on you. It all depends on Christ. We reach forward to grab hold of life, because *“Christ has made us his own.”* We're on his team, he carries us over the finish line, even when we're too weak to go any further.

When we think of team efforts, we don't want to discount the value we are to one another. We have a valuable resource right here in Team Prince of Peace. Christ is owner, Paul his head coach. (As I said you can take any analogy over the edge.) We have important friendships that we make by our association here. We are a community in Christ, as such are to pray for one another in the time of need, root for one another and cheer each other on, we can be a moral support in the hour of trial.

Theologically, salvation, the mansions of heaven have been prepared for all who love God and Jesus Christ. It's a given. That's the Savior's promise to all of you. Salvation's price was paid at Golgotha, in full. Jesus breathed his last saying, "*It is finished.*"

But we are not finished. We need to live. We can celebrate our successes and thank God for them. Our losses, our failures, our sins—these we confess, cast aside and leave at the cross. We have not yet reached perfection. We strain forward towards *it*, pressing on toward that goal, that prize, that is ready and waiting for all who love God in Christ Jesus.

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