

“Winner Takes All”
Gordon Wiersma 5/20/12

Last week when I announced the beginning of the church softball season, I said that we were going for our 3rd straight good-sportsmanship championship – seeking an unprecedented dynasty of league domination for being nice. Now of course, there really isn’t a championship in good-sportsmanship –but there is a trophy! And of course there can be no dynasty in nice-ness – but these are the ways to compensate when you have a team that is, shall we say...winning-challenged. You may know that this is a bit of a Hope Church ongoing joke – how our softball team almost always loses (lost a doubleheader Friday). We mostly just have a good time – then enjoy the pizza & beverages after the game as much as the game itself.

But this is in fact a noteworthy attitude: because some people take church softball really seriously! Even in our lowest level league, there are teams bent on world softball domination. Sometimes I am bemused by that; other times when trailing by 20 runs and the other team is trying to make it 40, I am less than amused. People like to win – they don’t like to lose...some have observed that to be true even about me! But I think in some sense everyone likes being on the winning side. And as I have gained just a modicum of maturity, what I have come to see is the remarkable human capacity to enjoy winning without considering the person who is losing. Winning is stunningly narcissistic – the capacity to crave a reality for yourself that prevents it for another: I win = you lose; you win = I lose; winning requires losing. Or does it? Let’s see...

I actually started thinking about some of these winning and losing ideas last week when I led Early Worship – two of the lectionary passages spoke about “victory”: the victory of God in the world – the victory of love and faith over the world. And I wondered with Early Worship what “victory” means as people of faith – and then it seemed to me that victory and winning are themes present in today’s Scripture too. Those words aren’t found in these passages, but isn’t the Ascension story a ‘winning’ story? Jesus is crucified – Christ is Risen! – and then in both Acts and Luke we hear how Jesus is lifted up...that’s

a classic victorious move: hoist the champion up on your shoulders, or better yet into the clouds. The feel of the story is victorious – triumphal: ‘you will receive power to proclaim this story to the ends of the earth, to all nations.’ Which becomes clearer still with the feel of what we hear in Ephesians: ‘the great power of God that raised Christ from the dead has placed Christ above every authority and name forever – God has put all things in subjection to Christ and Christ is the head of all things.’ This is victorious language – it echoes the Psalm: ‘the LORD Most High rules the earth and is exalted – we rejoice in the victory of our God.’ This is the song of the winners – the ‘Hail to the Victor!’ fight song?! ‘God wins – Christ reigns.’

That sounds good to me! – shall we just say AMEN! and leave it at that?! Well, maybe you and I know just what we mean with all of that victorious talk – and it is simply good news to celebrate. But let’s just suppose that I was not so familiar with it – say I am interested to understand more of what ‘God wins’ and ‘Christ reigns’ is about. That being the case, I would have a couple of issues to raise with you about this victorious Christian celebration of Ascension Day – issues which I’m sure you would want to graciously listen to and respond to...

The first issue is: “God wins – Christ reigns”...really? – have you looked at the world lately?...or anytime. “God wins”? Have you seen the news? Violence – suffering – sickness – injustice... “Christ reigns”? So what about the oppression – war – intolerance – hatred that is rampant in the world. “God wins” – “Christ reigns” sounds good – but you can’t just say it to make it true – there would seem to need to be some evidence to support the claim. You can’t just say the Hope Church softball team rules the league and make it be so – you have to look at the scoreboard for your claim to have some veracity to it. “God wins – Christ reigns”...really? Are you sure?

Hmm – that’s a pretty big issue – a pretty good point! How would you respond to that?

But, if you weren't quite ready to answer me about that, I could bring up another issue. Even if I will concede your "God wins – Christ reigns" claims – I want to know how the church carries that out. Is this about you Christians winning, and everybody else losing? I'm just asking, because a glance at the story of the church points to that idea. History is full of the church trying to hold power and assert its authority over others; full of the church battling against other faiths and dividing the world into up and down. Sometimes you Christians seem to talk about this and other times not, but you certainly seem to be about a kind of winning that requires a lot of losers too. Is "God wins – Christ reigns" just about being on the winning team? I'm just asking...

We could all use some friends to raise challenging issues and questions like that for us – and we can be friends to one another and raise them for ourselves. What do we say about seeing the victory of God and living out the reign of Christ in this life, this world?

Well perhaps a bit of solidarity with Jesus' disciples will start us in the right direction... some understanding that this was a challenge for them to figure out as well. We hear in Acts that after Jesus' resurrection, and Jesus has appeared to them a number of times, the disciples then ask Jesus: "Now is it time for the kingdom of Israel to rise and reign again?" This is a very misguided question! Jesus has lived, died and risen... and the disciples think it is all just about getting their people back on top. Jesus says – and I'll paraphrase: 'No – leave who's in charge up to God – your job is to be my witnesses, and the power to do that will come from the Holy Spirit.' Jesus' disciples from the very start, and ever since, have had to be taught what kind of reign – what kind of victory – is involved in being a follower of the risen Christ.

And you'll find that teaching in the triumphant language of Ephesians as well. This victorious song to the risen and ascended Christ has a fascinating ending: Jesus Christ is the head of all things – but what is his body? 'The church, which is his body'. This is figurative AND literal language – Christ is head, but his body, his presence in the world, is

the church – and the church, we’re told, is the ‘fullness of him who fills all in all’ – the Lord of all fully expressed in his body.

So noticing that in Acts and Ephesians, let’s return to those issues – how can we say “God wins – Christ reigns” about this world? And what does “victory/winning” mean for the church? Let’s start with that 2nd one first. It seems very important to me that we reclaim – redeem – rediscover the idea of victory in a world of winning and losing. I become increasingly fascinated with words in my old age and the meanings we assume or impose, and the meanings that we can reclaim and recover. So, what if victory has to do not with subjugation but revelation – the triumph of revealing what is true about who God is – and who we are – and what life is about? The triumph of a truth that reveals life. What if victory is not something that divides – into winners and losers – but something that creates? Creates a reality in which faith grows and hope thrives and love leads. What if winning is meant to express the loss of fear and despair, and the gift of courage and wholeness? In the life, death, resurrection, and ascension of Jesus Christ, we find a remarkable revelation: winning does not require losing – the victory of God is a love broad and deep and high enough to claim all things in the life Christ reveals – ‘the fullness of him who fills all in all.’

That’s something to think about – and maybe it can help us with that 1st issue, “God wins – Christ reigns” – really? It’s a very good question. And if we try to ignore it, or live in denial, or proclaim a reign that is plainly false, we are at best quaint and at worst pitiful and irrelevant. This truth, this reign of God is not plain to see – and that is because of the power of sin and evil and death in this world; and because of the failures of the church to fully live out the victory God has given – we can both recognize and confess that. But here’s the thing – in all the glory of this Ascension day victory language, the place we are to see this reign of God is right here – among us – in the church, the body of Christ. The new members we’ve welcomed today – you’re it! – in you God would express the fullness of Christ; Martha, Ian, MJ, Sophie – as you’ve made profession of faith today – you’re it –

you are the victory of God! The Lord of all things has chosen to be made real to this world through you. Hope Church – you’re it! – God has made us witnesses – and what the victory of God in Christ looks like is what we look like – showing the world the reign of God.

We may question God’s wisdom in choosing us – but we need not question that God has left us on our own to do this: we are witnesses because the Holy Spirit is given to us to redeem and gift our lives in ways that bring the reign of God into being within us and through us. And we have the remarkable calling to be the body of Christ with a victory that shows the world a different way of winning: living in the truth that God has revealed the ways of life; witnessing to God’s creation of hope, faith, love; in the face of a broken world, living with courage and conviction rather than fear and despair. We are witnesses that God’s reign is at work in the world not to divide us into winners and losers, but to proclaim the victorious love of a God who speaks life to death and wholeness to brokenness. This is a victory found not in what we see in the world, but what the world sees in us. “God wins – Christ reigns” – that is a victory song that is the word of life for us; and even more, through us to be life-giving for all. Thanks be to God. AMEN.