

The very credentials these people are waving around as something special, I'm tearing up and throwing out with the trash - along with everything else I used to take credit for. And why? Because of Christ. Yes, all the things I once thought were so important are gone from my life. Compared to the high privilege of knowing Christ Jesus as my Master, firsthand, everything I once thought I had going for me is insignificant. I've dumped it all in the trash so that I could embrace Christ and be embraced by Him. I didn't want some petty, inferior brand of righteousness that comes from keeping a list of rules when I could get the robust kind that comes from trusting Christ - God's righteousness. I gave up all that inferior stuff so I could know Christ personally, experience His resurrection power, be a partner in His suffering, and go all the way with Him to death itself. If there was any way to get in on the resurrection from the dead, I wanted to do it. I'm not saying that I have this all together, that I have it made. But I am well on my way, reaching out for Christ, who has so wondrously reached out for me. Friends, don't get me wrong: By no means do I count myself an expert in all of this, but I've got my eye on the goal, where God is beckoning us onward - to Jesus. I'm off and running, and I'm not turning back. So let's keep focused on that goal, those of us who want everything God has for us. If any of you have something else in mind, something less than total commitment, God will clear your blurred vision - you'll see it yet! Now that we're on the right track, let's stay on it. Philippians 3: 7-16

Welcome to Sports Sunday, where we've heard the Apostle Paul's athletic metaphor of "pressing on the goal for the prize of the heavenly call of God in Christ Jesus". Earlier this month many of us religiously watched the Olympic Games in Rio to cheer for our favorite athletes, and count the number of medals won by our fellow Americans, and to be amazed by the abilities of the human body. There are 529 days before the Winter Games in Korea, and no one who expects to compete there is resting on a medal... they're already training for the next event. All of the Olympians who were interviewed during the Games had unique personal stories but what they had in common was single-mindedness.

Single-minded is the word that best describes the Apostle Paul, who before he met Jesus in a blinding light on the road to Damascus, was single-mindedly tracking down and persecuting Christians. After his conversion Paul shaped and mentored and

helped build young communities of fellow-followers of Christ who became our spiritual ancestors... the Church. Paul chronicled his life work - single-mindedly knowing and following Christ - in his letters to the churches.

Paul calls us back (and all of us need to be called back into training for the real prize, a life in Christ) because we wander, and we get lazy, and we forget why we're here. In his letter to the Philippians Paul shows us what the Christian life looks like: it's joyful, it's humble, it's passionate, it strives for spiritual maturity, and it's content in all things. Paul saw the prize - the gold medal - as a life fully lived in Christ. Anyone training to be a committed Christian can use this short letter to the Philippians as an instruction manual. If you haven't read it, or you haven't read it recently, these four chapters will help you train for the main event: a life fully lived in Christ.

What does it mean to live life fully in Christ, and why doesn't it sound as sexy and exciting as shopping for new clothes, or driving an Italian sports car, or winning the lottery? I think it's because training for an event... gymnastics, or volleyball, or swimming... is hard work and it takes effort and single-mindedness. The win, the recognition, the gold medal, is a brief exciting moment, but training is just hard work. We don't work hard for something unless we can see and taste the reward... unless we believe in the outcome. To know that we are loved and valued beyond anything our hearts and minds can comprehend; to know that we are forgiven and washed clean for doing harm, or hurting others; to know that we are part of a master plan to redeem the world with love and hope... if we knew that this was what we were training for, would we be more passionate and committed and single-minded about following Jesus?

Let's look at the five markers of the Christian life Paul wrote about, and imagine the rewards of competing in this event (a life fully lived in Christ.) Paul taught the Philippians about the rush - the exhilaration - of following Jesus, training in five (you can count them on one hand) ways: Joy, Humility, Passion, Sanctification, and Contentment.

Joy is the first marker. Paul was mocked, beaten, imprisoned, and run out of town for preaching about Jesus. So the joy he experienced in following Christ can't be confused with happiness. Happiness is more about getting what we want... and joy is more about knowing who we are (beloved, forgiven, redeemed children of God) and knowing why we're here (to love God and make a difference in the lives of others.) Paul was joyful because his identity was not in his accomplishments but in his relationships... with Jesus and with others. Paul experienced joy in praying for others, in encouraging people, and in using his own experiences as teaching tools for those who were struggling to be faithful followers of Christ. He wrote to the Philippians, "I thank my God every time I remember you, constantly praying with joy in every one of my prayers for you." One of the ways we compete in the main event (that is, a life fully lived in Christ) is to practice joy... sometimes known as the acronym for Jesus, Others, and You. Put Jesus first, put others second, and put yourself third.

So... Humility is another of the markers in this event. The word humility has the same root word as humble - humus - which means from the earth. The bible tells us (and every Ash Wednesday we remember this) that we were created from the dust of the earth. The bible also tells us that we were created in the image of God. So we are to hold in tension that we are both made of clay and have within us the divine spark of

God. We can't think too much of ourselves or too little... and we are not to compare ourselves with others. We are all God's children, all of us beloved. Paul wrote to the Philippians, "Agree with each other, love each other, be deep-spirited friends. Don't push your way to the front; don't sweet-talk your way to the top. Put yourself aside, and help others get ahead. Don't be obsessed with getting your own advantage. Forget yourselves long enough to lend a helping hand." Humility helps us to love others as well as we love ourselves. Jesus said what's most important to God is that we love God with everything we are, and that we love others as well as we love ourselves.

Passion is a marker in this event... of a life fully lived in Christ. Passion is used to describe desire, enthusiasm, affection, and even suffering. Paul was passionate about following Christ... even when it meant suffering. We in the western world know little about suffering for our faith as Christians do where it's forbidden and illegal. Or do we? It isn't forbidden to be a Christian here... but it's odd... it's equated with being intolerant, archaic, anti-science... and sadly there's a loud (Christian) voice in the media that supports this view of us. Our passion for Jesus has to start with affection for Him, and knowing that we are loved and valued, that we are forgiven, that we are blessed beyond measure, that we know Who to thank for our blessings. We love Jesus because He first loved us. That love gives us enthusiasm to be able to talk about how His love is working in us, and changing us. And then maybe we exercise courage and share our faith, and tell others that we see a life fully lived in Christ as the real prize... worth more than any other honor or trophy... even if we suffer uneasiness, or fear that we'll be mocked or misunderstood... we start to talk with others about what it is to follow Jesus. Paul wrote to the Philippians, "If anyone has reason to be confident... I have more... yet

whatever gains I had, I have come to regard as loss, because of the surpassing value of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord.” Passion is one of the markers of the Christian life.

Sanctification is another of the markers in this event: of a life fully lived in Christ. Sanctification is a Wesleyan word; John Wesley, the founder of Methodism, believed that we experience God’s grace in three ways... God’s prevenient grace (God loves us before we ever know about God); God’s justifying grace (we say “yes” to God’s love and mercy, and allow it to work in us); and God’s sanctifying grace (God makes God’s home in us, and begins to transform us.)

This pericope from Paul’s letter to the Philippians is about sanctification, about a life fully lived in Christ. He writes, “Not that I have obtained this or already reached this goal; but I press on to make it my own, because Christ Jesus has made me His own. Forgetting what lies behind and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize of the heavenly call in Christ.” Sanctification is the opposite of a comfortable faith that is simply content to believe in God. No one ever won a race without training for it. Sanctification is spiritual training... it’s exercising our spiritual muscles by loving as Jesus loves, forgiving as Jesus forgives, and serving as Jesus has served us.

The fifth marker in this event of a life fully lived in Christ is contentment. Of all the markers in this race, contentment has to be the most counter-culture. Advertising relies on our discontent and restlessness. Advertisers tells us that if we buy and own something we will know satisfaction and contentment. And we might. For a while. It seems to me that contentment is knowing who we are in God’s sight. It’s taking off the glasses we might look through (at ourselves, and at others) of judgment and criticism

and shame... and instead see clearly and fearlessly how God sees us: that we are God's own; created in God's image; and gifted and blessed to help heal the world. We are all a work in progress; far from perfect and yet glorious reflections of God's love.

Think of the team you cheer for, the team that's the most fun for you to watch. Sports fans participate in the life of a team and share their wins and losses, their passion, their work, and their pleasure. We are a team... the Body of Christ... and how we exercise and practice the markers of the main event - a life fully lived in Christ: joy, humility, passion, sanctification, and contentment, allows others to experience... maybe to taste and see... the goodness of God, and the rewards of following Jesus. Go team! Amen.