

Of Winners and Losers



Our society tends to divide us up into winners and losers. Sadly, we don't often reflect on how this affects our relationships with each other, nor on what it means for us as Christians.

What does it mean? In essence, that our relationships with each other tend to be too charged with competition and jealousy because we are too infected with the drive to out-do, out-achieve, and out-hustle each other. For example, here are some of the slogans that pass for wisdom today: Win! Be the best at something! Show others you're more talented than they are! Show that you are more sophisticated than others! Don't apologize for putting yourself first! Don't be a loser!

These phrases aren't just innocent axioms cheerleading us to work harder; they're viruses infecting us so that most everything in our world now conspires with the narcissism within us to push us to achieve, to set ourselves apart from others, to stand out, to be at the top of the class, to be the best athlete, the best dressed, the best looking, the most musically talented, the most popular, the most experienced, the most travelled, the one who knows most about cars, or movies, or history, or sex, or whatever. At all costs we drive ourselves to find something at which we can beat others. At all costs we try to somehow set ourselves apart from and above others. That idea is almost genetically engrained in us now.

And because of that we tend to misjudge others and misjudge our own meaning and purpose. We structure everything too much around achieving and standing out. When we achieve, when we win, when we are better than others at something, our lives seem fuller; our self-image inflates and we feel confident and worthwhile. Conversely, when we cannot stand out, when we're just another face in the crowd, we struggle to maintain a healthy self-image.

Either way, we are forever struggling with jealousy and dissatisfaction because we cannot help

constantly seeing our own lack of talent, beauty, and achievement in relationship to other's successes. And so we both envy and hate those who are talented, beautiful, powerful, rich, and famous, holding them up for adulation even as we secretly wait for their downfall, like the crowd that praises Jesus on Palm Sunday and then screams for his crucifixion just five days later.

This leaves us in an unhappy place: How do we form community with each other when our very talents and achievement are cause for jealousy and resentment, when they're sources of envy and weapons of competition? How do we love each other when our competitive spirits make us see each other as rivals?

Community can only happen when we can let the talents and achievements of others enhance our own lives and we can let our own talents and achievements enhance, rather than threaten, others. But we're generally incapable of this. We're too infected with competitiveness to allow ourselves to not let the achievements and talents of others threaten us and actualize our own talents in a way so as to enhance the lives of others rather than to let ourselves stand out.

Like our culture, we too tend to divide people into winners and losers, admiring and hating the former, looking down on the latter, constantly sizing each other up, rating each other's bodies, hair, intelligence, clothing, talents and achievements. But, as we do this, we vacillate between feeling depressed and belittled when others outscore us or inflated and pompous when we appear superior to them.

And this becomes ever more difficult to overcome as we become more obsessed with our need to stand out, be special, to sit above, to make a mark for ourselves. We live in a chronic, inchoate jealousy where the talents of others are perennially perceived as a threat to us. This keeps us both anxious and less than faithful to our Christian faith.

Our Christian faith invites us not to compare ourselves with others, to not make efforts to stand out, and to not let ourselves be threatened by and jealous of other's gifts. Our faith invites us to join a circle of life with those who believe that there is no need to stand out or be special, and who believe that other people's gifts are not a threat, but rather something which enriches all lives, our own included.

When we divide people into winners and losers then our talents and gifts become sources of envy and weapons of competition and superiority. This is true not just for individuals but for nations as well.

One of these competitive slogans within our culture tells us: Show me a good loser and I will show you a loser! Well, seen in this light, Jesus was a loser. People were shaking their heads at his death, and there was no championship ring on his finger. He didn't look good in the world's eyes. A loser! But, in his underachieving we all achieved salvation. Somewhere there's a lesson there!

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