

The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
September 25, 2016

**“God of the Losers”**  
by Mary Anne Biggs

I Timothy 6:6-19 ~ Luke 16:19-31

Football is *big* in Texas. Some of you may have watched the television program “Friday Night Lights” ... or perhaps you saw the movie by that title. They both stemmed from a book written about high school football in a town 20 miles from where I grew up. In the early 1980’s, Permian High School in Odessa, Texas built a one million dollar football stadium. I’m embarrassed to say that a \$60 million dollar high school stadium that seats 18,000 was constructed in Allen Texas in 2012, and I’ve just learned that a neighboring suburb, McKinney, is beginning construction on a new high school stadium that will top \$70 million. I shudder to think where this “arms race” will end. But one million dollars for a football stadium was big money back then in Odessa, and no one batted an eye. Why, because they were winners. They took home the state trophy time after time, and they were gods in that town.

And whose words do you think were emblazoned on the walls ... perhaps Darrell Royal’s, the “winningest” coach at the University of Texas? Nope ... it was Vince Lombardi’s famous dictum “*Winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing.*” I just found out this week he didn’t *actually* say this, and get this, I learned that at a website called “Quotes from Lord Vince Lombardi!”) Folks from Wisconsin take their football pretty seriously too!

Yes, we all love a winner, but the Bible makes a remarkable theological assertion which goes against the prevailing view of every culture since the dawn of time ... that the almighty, loving God of the universe is the God of the losers, too! This is no small assertion. We have all seen the receiver cross the goal line, spike the football, and point to the skies to thank God for his personal victory. We may ourselves have thanked God publicly for our success. We often praise God for the blessings we have received. But when have we ever given God thanks for our losses?

Do you remember that amazing speech that George C. Scott delivered in his portrayal of General Patton? “*Americans love a winner and will not tolerate a loser. Americans play to win all the time.... That’s why Americans have never lost and will never lose a war. Because the very thought of losing is hateful to Americans.*”

Even though his words are no longer true in the eyes of some, I think that speech is dead on about our worship of winning ... and not just in war ... but in every arena of life. We are raised to be competitive, not cooperative. We turn everything into a contest. We compare games to wars, and business to battles. And we all know how you keep score ... with money and material. What does the bumper sticker say? “Whoever has the most toys wins.” In a culture

that values winning so much, we naturally call upon God to guarantee our victory and think of the winners as favored by God.

We are not the first, nor the only people to do this. In the ancient world, when cultures came into conflict, war was considered a contest between gods. The god of the winning side was shown to be true and more powerful. Losing meant that you had displeased your gods, or worse, that they were not gods at all. But the biblical prophets challenged that idea ... and Israel learned an important lesson the hard way. They lost their ill-fated war with the empire of Babylon. Jerusalem was destroyed and the people went into exile. But far from home they discovered that God was not limited in location to the borders of Israel. *In Babylon* they discovered that God lived there, too. *In Babylon*, they discovered that prayer from any place or any circumstance is never a long distance call. *In Babylon* they realized that God is not just the God of the winners ... but the God of the losers, too.

Just before the city fell, the prophet Jeremiah purchased a piece of land at Anathoth ... not far from Jerusalem. It wasn't just *any* piece of land. It was his covenant property ... his family's share of Israel's holy land ... divided among the tribes just after the Exodus. Buying this land was Jeremiah's affirmation that God was still keeping covenant with Israel. Maybe this proves the old dictum: "When the going gets tough, the tough go shopping!" But most financial advisors will tell you it's not a good time to buy real estate when the tanks are rolling through!

For Jeremiah ... who had repeatedly warned that God was bringing judgment on Israel for their misplaced faith in alliances and arms, it was a dramatic sign of hope. The consequences of their idolatry were now visible and inevitable. They were going to pay a high price for their arrogance. They were going to lose. But God was still with them. God would not abandon them. God would bring them back. In the very moment when it was *hardest* to hope, Jeremiah changed his message from the bad news to the good news ... that God is the God of Losers, too.

Jesus also turned worldly values upside down. In his day people put a moral interpretation on poverty, sickness, and sorrow. You must have done something to deserve God's disfavor! But Jesus focused upon these victims and called them God's blessed beloved. He always noticed those people who were invisible to everybody else ... existing in misery on the margins of a society run by the powerful well-to-do. He ate with sinners and tax collectors ... he healed the sick ... and he called his followers to love "the least of these."

Take this story he told about Lazarus and the rich man. The rich man was the quintessential winner of the day. He was Bill Gates and Warren Buffet rolled into one. He wore designer clothes and ate every meal at five star restaurants. At the opposite end, Lazarus was the poster boy for "losers." He was homeless and covered with sores and stood in line in the alley waiting for the rich to throw him a crumb.

In those days the gap was very great between the rich and the poor. Naturally, the rich didn't worry much about the poor. They didn't even particularly notice them. In fact, their wealth made it possible for the rich to isolate themselves from seeing the suffering of the poor. Just like it is today! Will Willimon writes:

*The richest 1 percent of us have nearly as much wealth as the entire bottom 95 percent....! We, the nation of opportunity, have become the nation of economic gaps.... Be well assured that the poorest of the poor, as well as the anxious middle class, will not bear the current economic disparities silently forever. The gap between rich and poor will be among our greatest political challenges of the future, and may be the source of God's judgment upon us.*

The gap between Lazarus and the Rich Man was a great chasm because of the society structured by humans. But, as always, there is one thing they all shared in common. As Hebrews puts it, *"It is appointed to mortals once to die, and after that the judgment"* (Heb 9:7). And in the world beyond, which God has prepared, the roles are entirely reversed. The rich man turns out to have a deep poverty of spirit. He has ignored the scripture's teachings about where true wealth lies ... where real life is to be found. But Lazarus, to his credit, has kept faith with God in spite of his circumstances. In God's world beyond, "the great chasm" is still there, but the values are entirely different. And Lazarus, the loser, wins because he is with God. The rich man suffers for the future of his family, who are all caught up in the idolatry of wealth. He wants to send Lazarus to warn them ... isn't it interesting that he still seeks to use somebody else as his servant? ... but Father Abraham asserts that the scripture is enough. They have the scripture, if only they will listen.

Now I don't want to suggest the Bible idealizes poverty, sickness, and suffering. The reason we love winning is that losing stinks! But here's the problem. Our values are skewed. A lot of what we see as winning is not good for us ... or for our society. It is selfish and divisive and soul shrinking. Winning, in the Bible, is not competitive ... but cooperative. It is not about wealth and domination and climbing over others to the top. It's about growing our soul. It's about what we are becoming inside. It's about righteousness and justice ... good relationships with God and other people. It's about creating a world where no one is excluded ... where everyone has enough ... and every person is treated with dignity and respect as beloved of God. It's about sharing and caring and letting God shape your character in the Divine image.

Moreover, when we stereotype people as either "winners" or "losers," we miss the whole point. There are no "winners" or "losers" in this life. We are all a mixture of the two. We all win in some ways and lose in others. But the good news of God's grace is that God is still with us when we lose ... when we are sick ... when we are troubled ... when we suffer loss ... when we experience grief ... when we flat out fail ... and when we suffer the consequences of our own mistakes. God teaches us through our losses ... God comforts us in our sorrows ... God loves us always ... whether we win or we fail. And Christ leads us to see those who are visibly suffering as an opportunity to share his love ... sacrificing our resources to grow our souls. As 1 Timothy puts it so beautifully:

*As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life (1 Tim 6:17-19).*

OK, here is what Coach Vince Lombardi *actually* said: “*Winning is not everything, but making the effort to win is.*” I agree with that ... if we are using the biblical definition of what it means to win in life. He also said, “*The quality of a person’s life is in direct proportion to their commitment to excellence....*” Well, that’s biblical. “*Whatever your task,*” says Colossians, “*put yourselves into it, as done for the Lord and not for mortals, since you know that from the Lord you will receive the inheritance as your reward; you serve the Lord Christ (Col 3:23-24).*” The Bible calls us to excellence. God urges us to strive for the best, and what *is* best is Christ’s model of love ... compassion ... and community.

We all know the world’s picture of the winner ... independent, tough, competitive, powerful, wealthy, good-looking, well-dressed, the proverbial self-made person. But this is the picture God gives us:

*As God's chosen ones, holy and beloved, clothe yourselves with compassion, kindness, humility, meekness, and patience. Bear with one another and, if anyone has a complaint against another, forgive each other; just as the Lord has forgiven you, so you also must forgive. Above all, clothe yourselves with love, which binds everything together in perfect harmony. And let the peace of Christ rule in your hearts, to which indeed you were called in the one body. And be thankful. Let the word of Christ dwell in you richly; teach and admonish one another in all wisdom; and with gratitude in your hearts sing psalms, hymns, and spiritual songs to God. And whatever you do, in word or deed, do everything in the name of the Lord Jesus, giving thanks to God the Father through him (Col 3:12-17).*

I can’t say I live up to this picture all the time. But I want to, don’t you? That’s the kind of person I want to be. And I think the more we conform to that image of Christ, the more we will win in all the ways that really matter

May we pray?

Gracious and loving God,

Thank you for being with us in all times and circumstances, in our losses no less than in our victories, in our sorrows no less than in our thanksgivings, in our failures no less than in our successes. Fill us with the compassion that understands none of us will be winners in life until all of us are winners in life and no one is branded a loser. Teach us what it means truly to win, that our lives might never end, but that we might be more and more like Christ and more and more prepared for the life in you that never ends and never loses. Amen.