

Following Christ in a Culture of Competition
John 21:1 – 14, 20 – 24
April 29, 2018 (Easter 5)

Now that it is finally (kind of) feeling like spring, it's baseball season, and we have been spending our Saturdays at the ball field. One of the things that I have been reminded of while watching 8-year-olds play baseball is that this is the point where they really start to *get* it, the game starts coming together for them, and they really start to get *competitive*. In just a few games this season, we have already had boys yelling at each other for making a mistake (“Why would you *do* that? What are you *thinking*? What's *wrong* with you?”), boys throwing bats when they strike out, boys throwing *helmets* when they get thrown out; we have had several instances of crying and one fight. They have become very competitive; they want to *win*.

I can *relate* to this because I played baseball and soccer all growing up, and I was *way* too competitive. As a kid, I would throw *my* bat if I struck out. I yelled at *my* teammates if *they* made a mistake. I was thrown out of little league baseball games for arguing with the umpire. I was once ejected from a church league basketball game for picking up a kid on the opposing team and throwing him down on the court (the coach was yelling at me to foul him, and I had no idea what that meant, so I *fouled* him). I *almost* got thrown out of a church league softball game *when I was a pastor* for arguing a call with the umpire. I once *spit in the face* of a *teammate* during a youth soccer game. I wanted to be the *best*, I wanted to *win*, and I simply could not handle it when things didn't go my way.

In my defense, I came by it honestly, because I was *taught* to be competitive; taught that I had to be *perfect*, that I had to be the *best*. I had the same little league baseball coach for years, and he would regularly get thrown out of games for arguing with the umpire. I had a soccer coach who once got so upset that he threw a *chair* onto the field in the middle of a game. And there were

the parents in the stands who very freely (and loudly) told us what we needed to be doing. I felt an immense *pressure* to *win*, to be *perfect*, to be the *best*. And as I sit through games now, I see all of that again. Parents yelling, “Bobby, *pay attention!*” “Be a hitter!” (because that 8-year-old boy didn’t *want* to hit the ball until you told him to). “*Throw strikes!*” (because he didn’t want to do that, either). Parents getting a *little* too excited, a *little* too into it, taking it *personally* if their kid strikes out. Coaches berating boys and *cursing* at them. They are acting like these kids are going to go play for Conestoga next week, and that college scholarship is already on the line.

We live in a culture of competition. Not just in sports (although that carries *way* more importance than it really *should* in our society), but our *economy* is driven by competition. Our education system and schools are driven by it. Politics and government are often driven, not by what is best for the country and the people, but by which side is going to win this particular argument (regardless of who it actually helps or hurts). And that competition *has* filtered its way into the life of the church. We view other churches as our *competition*, competing for *people* and *resources*. We talk in terms of competing for *time* with sports and school and work and other activities.

A pastor I worked with years ago told me about how he started his church at the same time that this other church started, but the other church grew a lot faster than his church did. He said that he would drive by that church on the way to his church on a Sunday morning and see the parking lot just *full* of cars, and he would say to himself, “What are we doing *wrong?*” He was constantly in competition with them, judging *his* church against *theirs*.

Competition has become so much a part of our culture and our lives that we almost can't help but bring it with us when we come *here*. We are so steeped in it. But that is *not* who Jesus calls us to be. And we see that in this last chapter of John's gospel.

There is something going on beneath the surface in this chapter that we don't always see. It starts off with the disciples going fishing. They're out on their boat, but they aren't catching anything. Jesus calls out to them from the shore, but they don't *know* that it's Jesus. He tells them to cast their net on the *other* side of the boat, and they catch a ton of fish. When this happens, it says, "The disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, 'It is the Lord!'" Who is the disciple whom Jesus loved? It's *John*, the one who is thought to have written this gospel. In verse 24 it says, "This is the disciple who is testifying to these things and has written them." John constantly refers to himself in this gospel as "the disciple whom Jesus loved." *Peter* wasn't the disciple whom Jesus loved. And Peter didn't recognize Jesus first in that boat. It says that John *told Peter* that it was Jesus. John is saying, "Peter didn't even *recognize* Jesus until I told him."

Once Peter hears this, it says, "he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea." So John inserts a little jab there that, "Oh, by the way, Peter didn't have any clothes on." Why did he feel the need to mention that?! John is *making fun* of Peter here. It says he jumped into the sea and started swimming to the shore, but the rest of the disciples came in the boat, "for they were not far off from land, only about a hundred yards off." He is making Peter look *silly* here.

This isn't the first time that has happened. Back in chapter 20, on Easter morning, Mary Magdalene goes to Jesus' tomb and finds it empty. John says, "She ran and went to Peter and

the other disciple, the one whom Jesus loved (John), and said to them, ‘They have taken the Lord out of the tomb, and we do not know where they have laid him.’” Then it says, “Peter and the other disciple set out and went toward the tomb. They were running together, but the *other* disciple *outran Peter* and reached the tomb first.” John is saying, “I run faster than Peter. I got there first.”

Are you getting the sense that there is *competition* here between Peter and John?

There’s more. Jesus asks Peter, “Do you love me more than these?” These *what?* They’re sitting around a fire with the other disciples. Jesus is asking Peter, “Do you love me more than they do?” Peter says, “Yes, Lord, you *know* that I do!” So it’s like they’re even competing over who loves Jesus the most!

And then I love what happens next. Jesus says to Peter, “Follow me,” and the very next thing it says is, “Peter turned and saw the disciple who Jesus loved following them.” Jesus tells him to follow him and Peter *turns* to look at John. It’s like they can’t *help* themselves! Peter sees John and says to Jesus, “Lord, what about him?” And by this point Jesus has had enough. He says to Peter, “If it is my will that he remain until I come, what is that to you? *Follow me.*”

There is this culture of competition among the disciples. And it’s not just here in John’s gospel. We see it all throughout the gospels. Luke 9:46, an argument arose among the disciples about which one of them was the greatest. Luke 22:24, a dispute arose among them as to which one of them was to be regarded as the greatest. Mark 9:33, “They came to Capernaum, and when Jesus was in the house he asked them, ‘What were you arguing about on the way?’ But they were silent, for on the way they had argued with one another about who was the greatest.” In

Matthew's gospel, the mother of James and John comes to Jesus, kneels before him, and asks a favor of him. "What do you want?" he said. And she said to him, "Declare that these two sons of mine will sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your kingdom." The first parent yelling from the stands.

So there is a culture of competition among the disciples, and Jesus' response to it is, "What is that to you? Why are you worried about *them*? *Follow me*. Set your sights on *me*. Don't focus on *them*. Focus on *me* and what I am calling *you* to do."

There is this iconic picture from the 2016 Summer Olympic Games, where South African swimmer Chad le Clos was competing against American swimmer Michael Phelps in the 200m butterfly. The two had been rivals for years, and they were neck-and-neck at one point. But as Michael Phelps starts pulling ahead, there is a picture of le Clos, *while he is swimming*, looking over at Michael Phelps. Like he was checking on him to see where he was. Phelps is laser-focused ahead, staring only at his goal. Which one do you think won? Le Clos was so concerned about what the *other guy* was doing, that it ended up costing him the race, while Phelps was only concerned about what *he* needed to do.

This is essentially what Jesus is saying to the disciples and to us. "Don't worry about what *they're* doing. Focus on what *you* need to do." The difference is, we're not competing with each other or other churches or anyone else. Competition assumes that there are limited resources or rewards. There's *not enough* – people, time, money, attention, love, blessing – so we have to fight it out with each other to get what we want or need. But we are called to follow a God of infinite abundance, in whom there is *enough*. Enough people for this church and that church. Enough time, if we find better ways to *use* it. Enough money for everyone, if we just share.

Enough attention, enough love, enough blessing for all. Enough room in God's kingdom for *all of us*. We don't have to compete for it.

When we lived in Nebraska, it was a small town with 4,000 people and *fourteen* churches. That was a lot of churches for a small town. And I remember once, another church was just starting up, and someone said to me, "Why do we need another church in town? They're going to take members away from the other churches!" And I said, "That church is reaching people that we aren't (or can't). We're reaching people aren't (or can't)." If we do what God is calling *us* to do, and other churches do what God is calling *them* to do, then won't more people be reached by the love of God? And isn't that what we want?

Competition *can* be good and healthy and helpful when it pushes us to better ourselves. If it pushes us to grow and learn and improve. Where competition becomes problematic is when it gets in the way of relationships; when it *hurts* relationships. Because the life that Christ calls us to is not about competition. It's about *relationships*; loving God and loving our neighbor.

I was talking with Jose Irizarry the other week, and he was telling me about a trip he took to South Korea. He went out shopping and found that you didn't just walk down a street and see electronic stores and clothing stores and hardware stores all next to each other. You would walk down one street that was *just* hardware stores. Another street would be *just* fabric stores. And they would all have the *same displays* out front and the *same prices*. He asked someone, "How do you *compete* with each other, if you all have the same prices?" And it was like a foreign concept to the person. "Compete? Why would we do *that*? You just find a hardware store and build a relationship with the owner, and that's the store you go to." It's not about competition; it's about *relationships*.

Jesus calls us to follow him. Not to worry if we're doing it better than this other person or church. But to set our sights on who he is calling *us* to be and what he is calling *us* to do. And we can *do* that side-by-side and hand-in-hand, because there is enough for all of us. That is true in our churches. It is true in our schools and our sports fields and our economy and our politics and every other aspect of our lives, if we will just *let* it be true. We don't have to compare ourselves with how someone else is doing it. We are all in this together, striving to be the people that God created and calls us to be. And if we can live from *that place*, then we will be living, not for our *own* glory, but for the glory of God.