

The Final Victory

sermon digest

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1 Corinthians 15:51-58

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For nearly a decade my sister and her husband lived in Saudi Arabia where only Islamic religion is permitted. They lived in the Western Compound for ARAMCO employees and were allowed one Bible, no church, and no clergy. To make matters worse, they were under constant surveillance for violations of prohibited religious observance. After several years of spiritual and cultural deprivation, they were starved for anything that seemed like home. Christmas and Easter were particularly difficult. One Advent season my brother-in-law decided to place a small wreath with an electric candle in a window of their house. He immediately received a visit from the police ordering the removal of the “Christian” candle from his window. Jon begrudgingly complied, but was obviously irritated by the ridiculous regulation. He decided to move a small table in front of the window with a desk lamp illuminating the wreath. The next day brought another visit from the police; the “Christian” wreath and desk lamp were also judged to be illegal. Not to be deterred, Jon decided to establish his own tradition. He removed the wreath and hung an old pair of running shoes in the window. The shoes were viewed daily with suspicion, but no “Christian” connection could be made, so the shoes were left hanging in the window with care “in hope that Saint Nicholas soon would be there.”

To my historical knowledge, shoes have never served as a Christian symbol, but careful reading suggests a covert connection between my brother-in-law’s shoes and Easter. The shoes were certainly more a symbol of frustration than faith. Saudi law did not change in spite of Jon’s persistent, playful irritation of authority. He actually had no intention of trying to create a new Christian symbol, but he may have been onto something.

I am sure that the manufacturers of the popular Nike athletic shoes are well aware that *Nike* was the Greek goddess of “victory.” Concerning the resurrection of Christ that opens the door to the resurrection hope for all of God’s children, Paul wrote, (1 Cor 15:54) “Death (*thanatos*) has been swallowed up in victory (*nike*).” My theory is not without flaw; the connection fits with Easter rather than Christmas.

Written before any of the Gospels, Paul’s epistle reached Greek Christians at Corinth with a play on familiar words. The persistent influence of Platonic religion led some Corinthians to deny the bodily resurrection of Christ. Interestingly, they believed in the immortality of the soul. Their problem was with the body. Paul the Jew was predisposed to a bodily resurrection, but he was less tied to the body than to the historical foundation of the Christian hope. Paul pointed to witnesses on Easter morning to a historical event, a substantial foundation for faith, not a nice theological notion. The real *Nike* was the victory of Jesus over power of death on Easter morning. Out of the struggle with the ultimate enemy death (*thanatos*), Christ emerged the ultimate victor (*nikos*). Thus, the natural flow of life toward a “dead end” has become in Christ a move toward the final victory (*nike*) over death (*thanatos*).

The victory cult of Nike is still hanging around. Since the 1928 Summer Olympics the victor’s medals have born the image of the goddess Nike with a palm in her left hand and the winners crown in her right. The Nike cult is still alive and well. We are saved by the trophy, and the cardinal sin is losing. If you have ever crossed the finish line ahead of the pack, played on a championship team or succeeded in achieving a major goal in life, you know how addictive victory can be. Winning feels good. The high, the sheer exhilaration of being on top, can come out of a great musical performance, winning the lottery, or winning a game of checkers. The high has produced cheaters using performance enhancing drugs and a special hell for the failures of this world who come in second. I fully believe that the cult of Nike is at the bottom of the present world economic crisis that sent speculators out with a game plan bound eventually to bring down the house, but immediate gratification of instant big profits, winning, was all that mattered.

We speak of born winners, but I suspect that the victors and the victims are made by the power of expectation. When we get so obsessed with the drive to win that our myopic vision does not reach beyond the

end of our nose, something is wrong. Visit any book store and browse the shelves. You will encounter a feeding frenzy on “how to win.” The winaholics are after every trophy, and every quest is turned into a contest in which all competitors must be relegated to the role of “enemy.” A college friend once observed that he quit playing football after high school because he was frightened by the thrill he got out of knocking the wind (and whatever else) out of his opponent.

Obviously religion is not above the games. The great world religions, especially Christianity and Islam, are in a head-on collision, competing for the human soul and increasingly represented in international warfare. The cry for *Jihad* (holy war) in Islam usually violates the teaching and spirit of the Koran. We have to remember that the cry began in the Old Testament and was the cry of the Christian crusades against Islam long before our present conflict. Militant conquest is somehow misplaced for followers of the Prince of Peace who refused to allow himself to be defended at this arrest and refused to defend himself at his trial. He faced and endured the brutal powers of his time with the gentleness of a lamb. The victory of Christ is eternal, not temporal; driven by love, not hate. The cult of Nike which pits churches and Christians against one another in a drive to be the biggest, the wealthiest, or the strongest has no place in the Kingdom of God. When Christians reach for the reigns of world power, we no longer stand with Christ at the cross. We have sold the soul of our faith for the cult of Nike.

The final victory is the only victory. Last Monday, April 6, I heard the final issue on NPR radio of a series called “This I Believe.” The idea for the production came from Edward R. Murrow’s 1950’s vintage radio program by the same name. Murrow described the objective of his program, “to point to the common meeting grounds of beliefs, which is the essence of brotherhood and the floor of our civilization.” The NPR producers in Louisville detected a contemporary need for hope touched in Murrow’s program. Monday’s final essay got personal for me. The essay came from Louisville’s Cassius Clay, who took the name Muhammad Ali when he converted to Islam.

I moved to Louisville for graduate studies shortly after Clay won the World Heavyweight Boxing Championship from Sonny Liston, and I listened with amusement to his famous boast, “I am the greatest!” The comments from Louisville folks about their native son sometimes contained a note of embarrassment. The court-ordered integration of public schools in 1976 sent my children to Ali’s alma mater Central High School in downtown Louisville. His mother lived in the Buechel community near our church, and periodic sightings of the great athlete were not unusual around the time of his retirement in 1981.

On NPR Ali told about parents who planted in their son’s head the idea that he was the greatest and that he could win it all. He began to believe in himself in jumping hedges and running races with neighborhood friends. Training for the Olympics, he ran down Fourth Street pausing in shops long enough to tell neighbors that he was going to the Olympics to win the gold medal. When he came home with the gold medal, he announced that he was going after the world heavyweight boxing championship. I detected a quality of maturity and character that were not so obvious in the bravado of the young athlete. No longer able to speak clearly, Ali’s wife Lonnie read the essay for him. He acknowledged that he is now fighting the biggest challenge of his life—Parkinson’s disease; and he concluded with the belief that has sustained him for a lifetime: “Nothing in life has defeated me. I am still the greatest.” The wear and tear of years plus the insidious disease Parkinson’s have left a shadow over the claims of championship. All of us know the facts of life that have taken away the speaking ability from a man that was once called “the mouth.” The disease may not defeat the spirit and determination of the old champion, but all of us know that it will strike the last blow.

Reginald Fuller called it “The Riddle of Easter.” Something happened after the crucifixion of Jesus to transform the disciples from frightened wimps shivering in fear of the darkness to courageous messengers carrying the gospel to the whole world. Paul declared that the crucified Christ was raised from the dead by the

power of God. The tomb was empty, and the death-grip on humanity is broken. Our hope does not rest on mythological gods and wishful thoughts. Paul declared that *nike*/victory has defeated *thanatos*/death in our history, that the final victory is the finish line when the last trumpet shall sound. "Listen, I will tell you a mystery!" "Death has been swallowed up in victory!" "Therefore, my beloved, be steadfast, immovable, always excelling in the work of the Lord, because you know that in the Lord your labor is not in vain."