

on competition



- Olympia, Robert Stone

Scripture Reading: 1 Corinthians 9:24-27

Preacher: Robert Steiner

It's easy to be a naive idealist.
It's easy to be a cynical realist.
It's quite another thing
to have no illusions
and still hold the inner flame.

- Marie-Louise von Franz

There is a triad that psychologists have identified as being symptomatic of our times: Performance equals ability equals self-worth. Its logic underpins a society governed by meritocracy, where people are appraised and valued according to their achievements and merits. It is assumed that everyone is given the same opportunity, and so what matters is a person's actual output, irrespective of personal circumstances or socio-political context. It is an approach to life which promotes a spirit of competition and rivalry not unlike the one the apostle Paul encountered during the Isthmian games in Corinth. Historical knowledge of the games and its symbolic power form an important backdrop for understanding Paul's use of athletic metaphors and for interpreting our particular text in his first letter to the Corinthians.

The Isthmian games were one of the smaller athletic festivals, organized for those who could not afford to attend the big Olympic games in Olympia. It would give people an opportunity to watch the great athletes in the stadium of their own city. The festival was held every other year. During the games Corinth became a host to the competitors and spectators, arriving from all over the empire. The Isthmian celebrations were held in high

esteem and were the best attended among all the national festivals in Greece. The games included "foots races, horse races, chariot contests, jumping, wrestling, boxing, and throwing of the discus and javelin." (Jerry Hullinger). Dio Chrysostom of Prusa, almost a contemporary of Paul, summed up the experience with wit and humor: "When the time came from the Isthmian Games ... all were at the Isthmus ... And at that time it was that you could hear the arena around the Temple of Poseidon any number of luckless sophists shouting and abusing each other, and their notorious students wrangling among themselves, and many authors reciting their silly compositions, poets declaiming their verses to the applause of their colleagues, magicians showing off their marvels, soothsayers interpreting omens, tens of thousands of lawyers twisting lawsuits, and no small number of hucksters peddling whatever goods each one happened to have for sale." (Hullinger quoting Dio Chrysostom, *Concerning Virtue*.) There is a good chance that Paul was in Corinth when the games of A.D. 49 or 51 were held in the city. If he earned his living as a tentmaker, then a festival with thousands of guests needing shelter would have been ideal for his line of work and an opportunity to get into contact with athletes, delegates, visitors, and merchants. And it has been argued that this might have led Paul to make Corinth the chief base for his missionary work in Greece.

As a likely eyewitness to the events of the games, Paul's use of the metaphor of the race is not surprising. The congregation in Corinth would have found it easy to relate to it. Gerd Theissen reminds us about the power images and metaphors have over our thinking and action. We choose the images with which and through which we interpret the world. There is no immediacy in terms of our interaction with the world. We never respond or react to the world as it is, but always in relation to those metaphors and images that almost function like a lens through which we see the world. So Paul's choice of this particular metaphor is a powerful rhetorical tool, revealing as much about his self-perception as about the context of his ministry.

The image of the race evokes a spirit of competition and rivalry and is therefore not without its dangers. It is promising in the sense that it assumes that life at its best is governed by clear rules and regulations that guarantee fairness and equal opportunity for all participants. The reality is of course that some are always more privileged than others, for historical, socio-political, or personal reasons. We might all get ready at the same starting line and respond to the same starting shot, but there will always be those at a disadvantage because of a lack of training facilities, poor coaching or insufficient sponsorship. And yet we all enter the stadium of life, hoping for success and recognition, for a fair deal and a good life.

But it is also a dangerous metaphor. The spirit of competition is presently fueled by high unemployment and lack of job opportunities. This is aggravated by a meritocratic system that believes that a person's progress is based on talent and ability. Historical disadvantages and unequal access to education are not given enough weight. Poor performance are then interpreted as personal failure and not seen within the bigger picture of socio-political and economic inequalities. As a congregation we have noticed among our younger generation an increase in anxieties and depression. Already at high school level the pressure of performance is strongly felt and the worldwide economic crisis has added to a growing sense of uncertainty. In addition there is a whole new cultural industry geared towards telling us that we need to be more sportive, more beautiful and wealthier to belong. And there are certain expressions of Christianity that blow into the same trumpet, preaching a God who wants us to be beautiful and successful, promising that if one has enough faith, a head start into one's career is guaranteed. To succeed is then to be blessed. To fail is to be punished. God is turned into the ultimate ring master and judge who at the end of the fight will pronounce you a winner or a loser. The story of Cain and Able poignantly shows how religion can at times deepen the problem of anger and jealousy instead of helping to soften the edges of fierce competition. But it is very clear that at the heart of the Gospel is the concern for those deemed "lost". Jesus did not come to raise the stakes of the game, but rather to minister to those who feel "poor in spirit" and left behind. The church is called to cushion the blows of meritocracy and encourage a broader understanding and compassion for failure. The one left in the cold is more important than the 99 who are safe and sound. The strong emphasis on compassion versus competition is deeply rooted in Israel's history and, according to Gerd Theissen, stands in strong opposition to the Greek culture of contest. It is a spirit of competition that originated with Greek aristocracies at war with each other, introducing sports competition to

improve performance and fitness. Such competitiveness also found its way into other areas of life. Philosophers would try to outdo each other with their interpretations of human existence and the universe. And while one can agree that such competition can generate enormous achievements, compassion gets quickly sacrificed on the altar of progress. Israel's experiences of oppression and exile prepared the way for a different trajectory. The biblical books of Job, the Psalms, and Ecclesiastes challenged the conventional wisdom of kingly bureaucrats, who ordered the world along the principle of "you reap what you sow", assuming that God's created order is always fair and just - a dominant theme in the book Proverbs. Israel's wisdom tradition wrestled with forms of suffering that cannot be explained theologically or sociologically. Life is filled with casualties that call for compassion and not for scorn and condemnation.

Did Paul manage to harness the power of his key metaphor without succumbing to the Greek spirit of competition? Or did his argument undermine his core theological conviction that we are justified by faith and not by our own doing? It takes a close reading of the text within the broader argument of the letter to show how he manages to hold both competition and compassion in a creative tension. The result are paradoxical statements that both protect the gift of grace and pose the challenge of human commitment and dedication when it comes to preaching this gift of grace.

"Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize? Run in such a way as to get the prize"(verse 25)

The shift from the singular to the plural is important. Unfortunately the English translation "hides" that shift. Paul tries to ignite the spirit of competition by reminding his audience that only one can get the prize. But already in the next statement he makes it sound as if everyone in the race is able to win this prize. He encourages all participants to run in such a way that all will receive the prize. I am reminded of Marathons where the two leading runners decide to cross the line together instead of challenging each other on the last few meters. It is a small step and shift for Paul, but a huge step in terms of countering the Greek culture of contest. The race is no longer about competing with each other, but about making sure that no one loses. The Good News have arrived, if everyone is able to experience him or herself as a winner. So, Corinthians, run, run together and cross the line together. After all we are, as Paul will explain further on in the letter, the one body of Christ, made up of different parts, but forming one body.

"I strike a blow to my body and make it my slave so that after I have preached to others, I myself will not be disqualified for the prize."(verse 27)

When Paul compares himself with a boxer "who is not beating the air" (1 Corinthians 9:26), he is referring to someone who is either unable to make contact with his opponent or busy practicing the art of shadowboxing, a well known training technique in antiquity. But his effective blows are not directed against another boxer, they are rather punching his own body. The contest is subverted into a fight with himself, a rather drastic image of subjugation for the sake of ascetic self-discipline. Considering the violent nature of boxing - knuckles were strapped with leather strips to make the punches more harmful - one cannot but be shocked that this is how Paul describes his work as a missionary and apostle: "Many of the contestants left the stadium with broken teeth, swollen ears and squashed noses; many sustained serious injuries to their eyes, ears and even their skulls." (Ludwig Drees as quoted in Hullinger) There were no rounds in Greek style boxing and you would fight to the end: Acknowledge defeat or get carried from the field. It was acceptable, for example, to keep hitting your opponent while he is already on the ground. Lucky him, if he could raise his hands in time to admit defeat. And what a contrast to the usual imagery Paul employs to affirm the body. In the same letter, he speaks of his own body as a temple of God's Spirit. We can see that Paul does not attempt to be necessarily consistent with his imagery and metaphors, but rather draws on them as needed to communicate the radical nature of his own calling and commitment.

One wonders why Paul felt the need to introduce such drastic images to portray himself as an exemplary

“athlete”. We know of course from the full correspondence between Paul and the Corinthians, that he did not have an easy stand in Corinth. Some congregants were not shy to expose his rather feeble presence in contrast to the powerful words in his letters. To them he did not fair well in comparison to some of the other visiting apostles. His attempts to cast himself as a successful runner and boxer must have been seen as a great embarrassment. Especially Paul's second letter to the Corinthians offers us important insights into the kind of ridicule and humiliation he had to face. But his critics might have missed the important point that Paul is making at the very beginning of his first letter. For there he makes it quite clear that for apostles of his caliber the stadium is ultimately not a place of glory and glamour, but a place of humiliation and suffering. From the very beginning of his argument Paul does not simply uncritically employ the metaphor of the race and contest, but keeps subverting it to serve his own argument:

“For it seems to me that God has put us apostles on display at the end of the procession, like those condemned to die in the arena. We have been made a spectacle to the whole universe, to angels as well as to human beings. We are fools for Christ, but you are so wise in Christ! We are weak, but you are strong! You are honored, we are dishonored! To this very hour we go hungry and thirsty, we are in rags, we are brutally treated, we are homeless. We work hard with our own hands. When we are cursed, we bless; when we are persecuted, we endure it; when we are slandered, we answer kindly. We have become the scum of the earth, the garbage of the world - right up to this moment.” (1 Corinthians 4:9-13)

This haunting account puts Paul's metaphors of the race and boxing into perspective. The arena of competition and glory is the arena of death. And the eternal crown to be won is the one of suffering, persecution, foolishness, hunger, and homelessness. Paul thinks of himself as “the scum of the earth” and “the garbage of the world”. There is very little recognition he can expect. And often insult is added to injury, especially from those he considers his brothers and sisters. But in his own mind, he runs and perseveres with the same stamina and determination of the elite athletes admired in the stadium. He is inspired by their training, discipline and focus. But his crown, and this is the fundamental difference, is not the expected reward for an extraordinary performance, but the gift of being recognized and affirmed by God independent of the standards and expectations of society. And in that way one of the world's most notorious workaholics keeps reminding us that our sense of self-worth and dignity as human beings can never rely on what we do, but simply on who we are in Christ.

It is important to remember how little control we have over our lives and how meaning and purpose are very fragile constructions, the result of our attempts to continuously invent ourselves and get a grip on our lives. But ultimately our very existence will always have to remain a profound mystery. We were not asked, if we wanted to exist and we had no control of when and where we would be “dropped” into this world. We are fortunate if we can be sure that genuine love between two human beings brought us into this world. But even such certainty is not a given. Prayers like Psalm 139 attempt to reassure us of a bigger mystery and love that is responsible for our existence. There cannot be any other explanation of why we exist, or why something exists at all. Our lives and this universe are shrouded in a cloud of unknowing. The journey of faith is as much about unlearning as it is about learning, as much about scattering as about gathering.

The present dominance of meritocracy reveals a serious spiritual crisis. Where religion fails to nurture the human spirit, new ideologies will find their way into the heart and mind, promising to fill one's emptiness with new meaning and purpose, a clear identity and self-worth. And so Paul runs and competes to make sure that as many people as possible will hear the Good News, that our victory is not dependent on our running and competing, but on God's gracious commitment to invite us back into the arena and crown us with a life that knows that God's love as revealed to us through Christ is enough. God's unreserved “yes” to us will allow us to break free from having to compete against each other to find favor in God's eyes and in the eyes of society. We run together - and no longer against each other - to make sure that no one is made to feel inferior or is left behind. And we compete against those ideologies that keeps undermining our freedom in Christ.

The "naive idealist" needs to know that the Good News need our running and competing, that they depend on the many small encounters of everyday life. The "cynical realist" needs to know that the Good News are not about our performance but about God's commitment to us. When Paul had finished his poetic variation on justification by faith, the stadium opened itself and we see him running into the world with a bright flame. The Good News need to be taken into every little village. They will be gladly received by those who never thought of themselves as standing any chance to triumph in the race of life: the children and elderly, the sick and addicted, the street people and refugees. It is a flame meant to be handed on from generation to generation so that more and more will "have no illusions and still hold the inner flame."

Main Sources: Gerd Theissen's reflections on Paul's metaphor of the race and Jerry M. Hullinger, "The Historical Background of Paul's Athletic Allusions".