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# Feeling God's Pleasure

Romans 12.3-21

A Sermon preached in Duke University Chapel on August 31, 2008 by the Revd Dr Sam Wells

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Duke is unique in America – certainly unique on the East Coast – as a private university with an élite academic and an élite sports program. Our teams feature often in national championship games; we perform strongly across a wide range of sports; we meanwhile consistently graduate a higher proportion of our student athletes than any other school. And yet there's one thing we don't do very much: and that is, talk about the role of élite athletics at an élite university. The recent strategic plan for athletics helpfully sets out why top class athletics is good for Duke. It gives the university national brand recognition across classes, enriches campus life, attracts a diverse and motivated student population, creates community, and cultivates a loyal alumni/ae body.

The plan also sets out the unprecedented pressures on contemporary college athletics. Cable television has every interest in non-stop scheduling and no interest in students getting to lectures or getting any sleep. To attract the nation's best coaches, you need to pay them telephone number salaries. Upgrading facilities becomes an unwinnable arms race. Student athletes are recruited so young that it seems some are signed up in the womb and there are rumors that some west coast colleges are looking into recruiting pre-conception.

Maybe it's time to ask ourselves what this avalanche of emotional, physical, and financial investment are really all about. What are the features of athletics that puts it at the heart of the university? And what has any of this got to do with Christianity? I'm going to reflect on three themes.

(1) The first is simply put: *practice* makes perfect. You wanna know how to sink a ten-foot putt to win the US Open? You go out at 6 in the morning every day of your 4 years at college and sink ten-foot putts from every conceivable angle. You wanna know how to snatch victory with 3 seconds left on the clock by getting a slam-dunk having started under your own basket? You get out there with your team-mates and work out 15 ways of doing so and how to communicate to each other which one you're gonna try. Work out your 99% perspiration, and your 1% inspiration comes easy. Practice, practice, and practice some more. Keeping our eyes on the prize keeps us honest, keeps us disciplined, keeps us loyal. Wanting not just to win but to win well and to win again and again teaches us sportsmanship, teaches us hard work, teaches us how to set priorities. Making ourselves better athletes more often than not makes us better people.

Athletics today is one of the best places to learn about obedience. Think about a medieval monastery: the monks had to learn teamwork, keep regular hours, attune their bodies, listen to one another's souls. Monasteries in the middle ages were the engine room of education, economic growth and character development. And today that role has been taken by sports teams. If you're looking today for commitment, obedience, dedication and people who will give everything for one another, you look at the Olympic Games, you look at the NCAA. And the individuals who've thrived there are likely to be leaders elsewhere.

A friend of mine used to be a senior executive in a famous engineering company. He chose to do a survey of what salaries people were earning ten years after joining the company. Turned out the people with the highest salaries were not the cleverest, or those with the best academic achievement, or those who'd been the highest earners when they'd joined the company: they were the people who were capable of persuading others and communicating a vision. These are the qualities you need to lead a sports team. These are the qualities you need to get the best out of any group of people. These are things athletics teaches you.

Look at St Paul's words in today's reading from the Letter to the Romans. "For as in one body we have many members, and not all the members have the same function, so we, who are many, are one body in Christ, and individually we are members one of another." He could be talking about a baseball team, a hockey team, a football team. When the 4 by 100 meter lead off woman runs out of her lane and gets disqualified in the track relay, the woman on the anchor leg is broken-hearted, but she realizes it's a team sport and they can only cross the line as a team. We practice not just to make our individual bodies better but to make our team more one body. We can't get there unless we all get there. Life is a team game. Athletes know this. If only the church did too.

(2) The second blessing of athletics is *play*. The great college football coach Red Sanders, who was born in North Carolina and coached at UCLA, famously said of his great rivals USC, "Beating them isn't a matter of life or death; it's more important than that." Now sports talk is notoriously prone to exaggeration, and no doubt he was half in jest. But these widely quoted and oft-repeated remarks indicate a transition from joy to obsession and from obsession to pathology. The whole point of athletics is precisely *not* to be about life and death, but instead to be a glimpse of timeless, intense play. An early theologian said "The glory of God is a human being fully alive." Athletics is about exploring what it means to be fully alive. In the film *Chariots of Fire*, the Scottish sprinter Eric Liddell explains how his running is not only play but also prayer. "I believe God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run I *feel his pleasure*." Feeling God's pleasure. That's got to be about as good as it gets. That's being fully alive and experiencing eternal life at the same time. The Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt was criticized for showboating as he crossed the line in the Olympic 100 meter final a couple of weeks ago. But he was in unknown territory. He was running faster than anyone has ever run. I'd like to think he was showing us what it's like to feel God's pleasure.

Coach Red Sanders is also associated with the phrase, "Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing." Again, this seems to miss the whole point of play. To play is to become so absorbed in a circumscribed and in some ways ritualized activity that you lose all track of time and space. Surely it's that, as much as the physical exercise or the camaraderie, that makes athletics so refreshing of mind and body. Once winning becomes everything the play stops being an end in itself and is relegated to being a means to an end. That immediately opens the door to a whole host of ungracious, dishonorable and sometimes illegal practices that technically count as winning but don't genuinely count as sport.

Winning with grace is an attribute you expect athletes to learn. But athletics isn't just about learning to win. It's also about learning to lose. Every loss is a kind of preparation for death. After all, in the game of life we all lose in the end. Athletics shouldn't preserve the illusion it's possible not to lose. It should help to train us in how to live and what things are worth living for even though we all lose in the end. Competitors are often quicker to understand this than fans are. (It's often the fans that drive the obsession with winning, as a displacement from a personal sense of loss that they know all too well.)

And that's where competition comes in. There's a brand of Christianity that suggests all competition is wrong, and should always be displaced by cooperation. But that's not St Paul's view. He says in today's passage, "Outdo one another in showing honor." There is such a thing as healthy competition, provided the prize sought and the methods used are appropriate ones. Competition is usually against others, but is always fundamentally within oneself, to be the best that you can possibly be, win or lose. In that sense competition is a way of showing gratitude for the faith and the gifts one's been given by not letting them go slack but making the most of them. Notice also the very human lesson in Paul's words: if there's something you know is right but you struggle to do, rather than just earnestly trying harder, consider making a game of it and involving others in a playful competition.

(3) And the third vital feature of athletics in addition to practice and play is *peace*. In the middle ages Italy wasn't one country: instead it was a host of city states, and these states had tinpot wars against each other with relentless regularity. I sometimes think of the ACC like Italian city states. The east coast schools are the city states of today, and we maintain a host of intense rivalries. But there's a vital difference. The rivalries are intense, but they're not about killing people. In fact, in a crucial way, they're a *substitute* for killing each other. A lot of the activity of our sporting contests is like war – putting on face paint, camping out as if mounting a siege, pumping iron, getting sick in the stomach, shouting war songs and manufacturing truckloads of testosterone – but at the end nobody dies.

On Christmas Day amid the carnage of World War One, the British soldiers heard the German infantry singing *Silent Night*. They ended up playing soccer together in no man's land between the opposing trenches. Why couldn't they just have made that soccer match a substitute for the whole war? A similar principle applied with the original Greek Olympic Games, where chronic hostilities between the city states were suspended in order for athletes to compete with one another in wrestling, chariot racing and the like.

One of the problems with peace is that we find it difficult to imagine a peace that isn't desperately boring. War may do terrible damage, but for many participants it gives meaning to their lives. Inter-collegiate athletics is a picture of the kind of competitive but nonviolent interaction that peace involves and perhaps even requires. If you think of the virtues of battle – the building of trust between comrades, the attempt to give your very best for the cause, the balance of patience and constant awareness, the development of skills for use at crucial moments, the power that comes through undying loyalty, the galvanizing of whole nations around a greater cause: competitive athletics grooms each of these qualities, without anyone getting killed; and these qualities become the foundation of peace.

And here's the heart of why athletics are about peace. St Paul says, "Do not be overcome by evil, but overcome evil with good." Every athlete, every sports team, sooner or later comes up against a player or a team that's bigger, stronger, faster or more talented than them. Believe it or not, it even happened to me. You've then got to work out a way to win regardless. That's where sport really gets interesting. Life is a series of challenges where the other guy or the other set of people seem to have all the advantages. Violence arises when you can't think of any better way to get level, get even, or get ahead. Athletics at its best is a training in how to overcome apparent disadvantage without violence.

I'm going to show my age here, but for me the 1975 Wimbledon final was an amazing experience of this. Everyone knew the defending champion Jimmy Connors, the ultimate counter-puncher, was going to be the champion for years to come. He seemed unbeatable. But along comes Arthur Ashe, 32 years old (which, in case you didn't know, in tennis terms is ancient), not as fast, not as strong, not as intense a player as Connors. But Ashe just takes the pace off the ball with his dolly backhand slice...and in no time Connors ties himself up in knots like a cat with a ball of wool. Ashe demonstrated the kind of intelligence that's required to wage peace: not making himself bigger and stronger, but learning to play *beyond the imagination of the oppressor*. And that's the kind of intelligence athletics teaches.

So what athletics is really about isn't big stadia, big money TV deals, or celebrity egos. Athletics is really about practice, and the qualities needed to blend and lead a team. Athletics is really about play, and the competition that's ultimately with your own limits. And athletics is really about peace, and the overcoming of evil with good. Athletics belongs at a major university, because a university as a whole is about disciplined practice at the limits of human endeavor, a university as a whole is about the profound, imaginative concentration that resembles the absorption of play, and a university as a whole is about discovering the paths that lead to peace. Other parts of the university may sometimes look askance at athletics because its visibility seems to overshadow equally valuable contributions being made elsewhere. But the point isn't to suggest athletics at the university is perfect: the point is to remember athletics and the university are playing the same game.

In Christian language, athletics is a way of understanding the Holy Spirit. For it's the Holy Spirit that makes us holy through the constant *practices* of discipleship; it's the Holy Spirit in which we dwell when we feel God's pleasure in our *play*; and it's a sign of the fruit of the Holy Spirit that we see when we realize we are living in *peace*. The problem only comes when we mistake athletics for Jesus, and mistakenly think athletics is eternal, is more important than life and death, or is the meaning of our existence. Jesus is all those things. Athletics is not.

Athletics is not Jesus, but it can be one of the most profound experiences of the Holy Spirit we can ever know. Remember Eric Liddell's words. "God made me for a purpose, but he also made me fast. And when I run I feel his pleasure." When we have practiced hard, when we have become a team, when we have used our collective imagination to overcome evil with good, when it all comes together, we can discover that remarkable experience of feeling God's pleasure. Students of Duke, God has made you for a purpose, but he may also have made you fast. Run, leap, hurl, soar – and *feel* God's pleasure.