

A people obsessed, ~~that~~ hearts pounding, faces red, muscles tensed, all around me sat a people obsessed. Hettinger was on the floor, at that moment five young men were doing everything they could to win. Only one thing mattered, the winning. It doesn't matter whether you win or lose, but how you play the game was forgotten. The goal, to be champions of the state of North Dakota mattered, more than playing a good game, more than having a good time, more than any thing else.

I've heard it talked about a lot in recent weeks, how a group of young people set as a goal to go to state. I remember when I was playing golf out at the country club when Todd Shirek was an 8th grader, Teddy Uecker was a freshman. Todd said to Teddy, when you are a senior and I'm a junior we're going to state. I kind of chuckled. It sounded foolish coming from such little kids.

But there I was Thursday night, screaming and yelling with all the rest, it mattered, winning it all mattered. Having a good season didn't seem enough, all the good plays, the brilliant moves, the hardfought victories were forgotten now. They no longer mattered, one thing mattered, the goal, the victory.

Forgetting what lies behind, and straining forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal for the prize. These could have been words from an interview in the game. Forgetting what lies behind: in every moment in the game this is true, the players always live in the now, the last shot made or missed means nothing, the straining forward toward the goal, the prize, this means everything.

Of course, it was not one of the players the other night who spoke these words, but St. Paul, speaking of himself. Forgetting what lies behind and strain<sup>ing</sup> forward to what lies ahead, I press on toward the goal <sup>for</sup> of the prize of the upward call of God in Christ Jesus. With the intensity of an ~~athlete~~ athlete straining forward to victory, Paul lives seeking to attain the resurrection of the dead.

Sheep out in the pasture, brousing on the grass, the sun warm, the breeze gentle, our master keeping us safe and secure, this is the picture of the Christian life I most like. The Lord is my shepheard, I shall not want, surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. But St. Paul uses different images. He speaks of putting on the breastplate of faith and love and for a helmet the hope of salvation, an image of war and battle. In battle there is no relaxing, no rest, but struggle with every ounce of enery, every atom in our being, seeking victory. He speaks of the image of the Olympic runner, straining forward, every muscles driving, stretching for the finish line.

When I considered <sup>the message for all of you</sup> ~~all of this~~, this past week, I was struck by one thing. Paul, who had so much, so many merits to rest upon counts them as nothing. Like the team that has had a great season, winning so many games, getting to state, finds that none of that really matters next to the prize, soix Paul can see only one thing. The surpassing worth of knowing Christ JESUS his Lord. On that road to Damascus Paul came face to face with the only one who would ever matter again to Paul. Missionary journeys, converts won, congregations begun, suffering endured, yeats of faithful living before God, all these Paul can count only as loss because of the surpassing worth of knowing Christ Jesus his Lord.

What happened there on that road? Can we understand it? Can we imagine it? Saul a man devoted to God, ready to kill those whom he saw as enemies of God's truth, suddenly turned inside out and upside down. Saul was a pious Jew, blameless as to righteousness under the law. He gave his whole life, his whole being to serving God, He did everything he could to eradicate the Christian sect, he was sure they were opposed to God.

But on that Road to Damascus, the sky opened, the the bright light shone Christ appeared and spoke to him and Saul the persecutor became Paul, the utterly devoted follower of Jesus Christ.



*and write*

For his sake I have suffered the loss of all things and count them as refuse  
in order that I ~~may~~ may gain Christ and be found in him.

As I sat and wrote on Friday morning, not knowing whether we would win or lose the state tournament, I thought of what it would mean. By the time I preached this sermon it would all be a memory, a thing passed. <sup>Thought of done</sup> If we won ~~they would~~ <sup>they had</sup> ~~join the towns to put a sign up on the edge of town, proclaiming~~ <sup>joined and I would mean</sup> Hettinger to be the home of the 1983 state champions. People would talk for years to come about the team that ~~we~~ won it all.

If ~~we~~ <sup>they</sup> lost, there would be thoughts and dreams of what might have been. But either way no one would ever <sup>think</sup> ~~doubt~~ that the efforts made the emotion invested the hours spent were wasted. Though we have never been champions in 1983, we somehow know what it will mean to us.

You and I will not have a Damascus road experience. I hear Paul speak and I wonder at his experience, his encounter with Jesus. But hearing Paul speak of Christ Jesus, I know that whatever it takes for me to come to his embrace, to finish the race victorious, will have been well worth it.

We have faced death in these last days. One dear and dear to us has finish-  
ed his race here on earth. Sometimes when death is far away, it may seem to us that other races, other concerns are more important. But even state basket-  
ball championships are seen in a different perspective when one we love  
finishes his course here on earth. Close to death, one ~~thing~~ and only one matters, Christ Jesus your Lord and my Lord. Gaining him, being found in him  
this is the one prize, the one goal,

Sometimes all of this makes me uncomfortable. All this talk of running  
in a race, seeking the goal, of counting everything as loss sounds like some  
new law. You must do this or that, everyone must be Paul, or God will not save them.

That is not Paul's intent. He does not speak of his devotion in order to fill us with guilt and anxiety. Rather he wants us to know, to understand  
to believe that Jesus Christ is worth everything. He wants us to live seeking the one who will never leave us disappointed, or empty. The surpassing worth

of knowing Jesus Christ, words cannot describe. But seeing what Paul gives to gain Christ, hearing what that means to him, we sense what Christ may also mean for us.

~~Know then that Christ is worth more than all else. Amen.~~

~~For Paul writes, forgetting what lies behind~~

for in imitating me, Paul writes us. Forget what lies behind and stretch forward

to what lies ahead, press on toward the goal for the prize of the upward call of God in Christ

Jesus. Amen.