
LAKE SIDE CHURCH of Chicago

† transforming lives † transforming our world for Christ

The **LAMPLIGHTER**



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THE THRILL OF VICTORY

A cloud of gloom has descended on the house of my good friend, John. An avid fan of the Alabama Crimson Tide, he relished in the anticipation of the much-hyped game with the LSU Tigers last Saturday. The game between the two undefeated football teams, ranked 1 and 2, was a rematch of last season's BCS championship game. The final score on Saturday did not favor Alabama as it did at the end of last season. The agony of defeat!

This, just after a devastating conclusion to the baseball season, when his beloved Atlanta Braves imploded in September. Leading by 10 games in the wild-card playoff race, the Braves entered a slump that ended with the forfeit of the playoff position to the St. Louis Cardinals on the final day of the season, considered one of the most memorable reversals in baseball lore.

I, on the other hand, am still enjoying what psychologists call BIRG, "basking in reflected glory." My Cardinals entered September with very little hope of a playoff berth this year. Even deeply committed fans like me were looking to Opening Day of 2012 to renew our enthusiasm and hopes for our team.

Then the miracle occurred. The Braves' demise, coupled with the Cardinals' winning streak, propelled the Cardinals into the playoffs. Most people discounted this team as a serious contender, but the Cards thumped the team with the best record in 2011, the Philadelphia Phillies, battered the Milwaukee Brewers, who had won the Central Division over the Cards, and staged an astounding come-from-behind victory over the Texas Rangers, which many professional sports writers have dubbed "the greatest World Series ever." The thrill of victory!

I have to ask myself the question, Why do people like John and me care so much? Why does the success or failure of our teams determine our emotional status the day after the game? In the course of world events, what possible difference does the win or loss of any team on any given day make to the 7 billion people struggling to survive on this planet?

Psychologists have advanced many theories and conducted numerous studies to understand fan psychology. Researchers have discovered significant hormonal surges and physiological changes in fervent sports fans that parallel that of the players.

For many years, psychologists postulated that the fervent fan was a lonely, alienated individual seeking community, identity and self-esteem through a close attachment to a sports team. Further research refuted that theory. Sports fans suffer fewer occurrences of depression and alienation than those who have no team affiliations.

Theories have traced sports psychology to the primitive wars between tribes. Warriors fought to protect or promote their fellow citizens in the competition for survival. These wars have migrated from the battlefields to the playing fields and tribal warfare has morphed into conference rivalries.

The stakes for the player-warriors have diminished to monetary rewards and renown. The benefits to the citizen-fans would seem to have dwindled even more. Yet, Dr. Robert Cialdini points out, "This is not some light diversion to be enjoyed for its inherent grace and harmony. The self is centrally involved in the outcome of the event. Whoever you root for represents you."

Life is difficult. Winning in life can be even more difficult. We increase our chances to win when we attach ourselves to representatives who compete for us. Their victories become our victories vicariously, enabling us to "bask in reflected glory." Their success inflates our sense of respect and optimism.

Another historical victory had vicarious implications for the entire human race, when "death was swallowed up in victory." (1 Corinthians 15:54) When Jesus rose bodily from the tomb, he displayed that his death had conquered sin, while his resurrection conquered death itself. And we literally enter into that victory through faith in Jesus and his work, "But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ." (15:57)

The apostle Paul expands the implications of our identification with Jesus through faith in Romans 6. In v 5, he says, "For if we have been united with him in a death like his, we shall certainly be united with him in a resurrection like his. Having died mysteriously with Jesus, we have died with him to sin and we are no longer enslaved to it. (v 6) And having been raised mysteriously with him, we now possess a new life and should "consider [ourselves] dead to sin and alive to God in Christ Jesus." (v 11)

The euphoria of a World Series championship evaporates over time. Distractions have very short life spans. The more substantial and consequential struggles of life regain our attention and demand our energy. Perhaps our vicarious victories somehow better prepare us for those struggles.

Our vicarious victory through faith in Jesus has unquestionably prepared us. Jesus' resurrection dramatically affects our sense of self and optimism. His defeat of death ensures the same win for us. His triumph over the grave secures the power of his resurrected life for us. We will never stop cheering and reveling in this supreme victory.

No agony of defeat will ever erase this thrill of victory.

Pastor Stan