Sunday, March 15, 1987
WINNING IS WHAT MATTERS (NO. 2 IN A SERIES: LIES WE TELL EACH OTHER)
II Timothy 4:1-8; Luke 9:23-27

We live in a world of lies — little ones and big ones. Recently in a newspaper column, Ellen Goodman described her own experience with lies.

"This is how the morning begins. In my role as angry consumer, I call Mr. Blank for the 12th time this month. His secretary, who recognizes my voice by now, tells me: 'I'm sorry, Mr. Blank is in a meeting.' I know the secretary is lying: (1) she is not sorry, and (2) Mr. Blank is not in a meeting. She knows that I know she is lying. I know that she knows that I know.

What do I say to her? 'Liar, liar, pants on fire?' No, I say to her, 'When will he be out of the meeting?' She then lies, '(3) I'm not sure but (4) he'll be glad to call you back.'

There we go. It is only 9:15 and I have already logged in the first four lies of the day. Or maybe I'm not counting right. What about the ad on the morning show starring an auto salesman (5) tearfully giving away his autos for a song? What about the billboard on the way to work promising (6) high living with low tar?'

These sound like little insignificant lies. But living with them day by day, we can become desensitized to deceit, and soon we begin to take even bigger lies for granted. Then there are the euphemisms we use because we do not like to hear the word "lies." Last year, our national government called its lies "disinformation." The lies were appropriate, the government said, because its campaign was directed against Libya's Muammar El-Qaddafi. In other words, the end justifies the means. We've heard of misinformation, but now we have "disinformation." A few years ago, we humorously talked about the three biggest lies that are commonly told among us. (1) The check is in the mail; (2) Don't worry, if anything happens, I'll marry you; and (3) We're from the government, and we're here to help you.

I believe that as Christians we are to speak the truth and to live the truth as we have received it from Jesus. It's not easy to do because, as I said last week, the culture in which we live is always subverting the church. It's so easy for us as Christians to buy into the language of the day, and when we do, we also swallow the values that shape the language.

And this brings us directly to the lie we want to talk about today: "Winning is what matters!" Some forces in the culture even put the lie in stronger language—"Winning is all that matters!" Continually in our kind of society, we talk of winners and losers. We go even further and equate worth with winning. Winning is so important that one old political saying put it this way: "Claim everything, concede nothing, and if defeated, allege fraud!"

Right now, in our time, this lie that winning is what matters is almost destroying one of our major private universities — Southern Methodist University in Dallas, Texas. And now this lie apparently has caught Bill Clements, the governor of Texas, in some lies of his own.

The point is the lie — winning is what matters — is a corrupting lie. It leads to a belief that winning at any cost is okay.

The belief that winning is what matters goes far beyond football and other sports. Many in our society make a religion of winning in every aspect of life. Winning becomes god.

Then we go on to support this lie with another one — that effort and desire are the only things needed to be a winner.

Tex Sample, a professor of preaching at St. Paul Seminary in Kansas City, tells this story about himself and the god of winning, or as we might also call it, the god of achievement. When he was 14, he wanted more than anything else to be a professional baseball pitcher. He used to practice every day in a parking lot behind a cabstand that his father owned. His target was a strike zone which he had painted on a furniture store wall with the permission of the owner. He purchased three rubber-coated baseballs for 49 cents each and began to pelt that wall with balls, trying to hit the strike zone — a pursuit that turned out to be an impossible dream.

One day his Uncle Paul, who owned the local fish market, walked up and asked him, “Boy, do you want to be a pitcher?” And he answered, “More than anything else in the world.” “Well, there ain’t but two things you gotta do,” his Uncle Paul said, “You gotta want to bad enough, and you gotta work hard enough.” “Is that really true, Uncle Paul?” he asked, because Tex didn’t really know anyone who wanted to more than he did, and in all the years he played baseball, he had never played on a team with anyone who worked harder than he did.

“Sure it’s true. You can do anything you want to if you work hard enough and want to bad enough. Look at Babe Ruth. If he could do it, you can!”

Tex Sample went on to say, “Subsequent events proved that my Uncle Paul was correct. I could have played major-league ball. I had everything it took, well, except for three things — three things that Babe Ruth could do and I couldn’t: Ruth could hit, and I couldn’t; Ruth could throw, and I couldn’t; and Ruth could run, and I couldn’t. But except for these three things, I could have made it to the big leagues. I found it to be a lie that effort and desire are the only things one needs to be a winner.”

What then does our Christian faith have to say about this lie — that winning is what matters and its corollary that effort and desire are the only things one needs to be a winner?

First of all, our faith reminds us that whether we win or lose has nothing to do with our worth as individual human beings. God does not evaluate us on the basis of winning or losing, and we are not to evaluate each other on this basis.

Unfortunately, in our society, to call someone a “loser” is to call that person a very bad name. There is hardly anything worse than to call an American a “loser,” far worse than “sinner,” “bigot,” “crook,” “thief,” or “coward.” A loser has committed the unforgivable sin. Because of this, too many among us are always on the spot to prove our worth by winning in whatever way we can. In religious terms, it becomes a form of “works righteousness.” It’s as if we have to earn God’s favor by proving we are winners. Soon we are evaluating all of life by this false standard.

In a small town, there lived a fellow named Bernie. From the time he was eight years old, he went up and down the street selling peanuts and popcorn and razor blades, and he yelled, “Get your peanuts, popcorn, and razor blades.” He began to work when he was so small that he could walk under the swinging doors of the pool halls without scraping his back. He was a poor boy and worked at this job year after year. Soon he received the nickname of “Popcorn,” or “Pops” for short.

When Bernie got to the 8th grade, he fell in love with a blonde-haired, blue-eyed classmate. One day he asked her to go to the movies. “Well Pops, I’d like to go. Let me ask my momma and I’ll let you know tomorrow because momma has to approve all my dates.” The next day Pops could not find the girl. In fact, he did not see her until two days later. She had been avoiding him. “Well, what time am I picking you up?” Bernie asked. “I’m not going,” said the girl. “What do you mean you’re not going?” “I can’t go. My momma won’t let me,” she said. “Why not?” “I’d rather not say.” “Yeah, I want to know why.” “Well Pops,” she said, “my momma thinks that you’re not good enough for me.”

It hurt him deeply and he never forgot it. The temptation is to be hard on the mother, but the mother had known what it was to struggle financially her whole life. Having a beautiful daughter in a majorette culture meant that the daughter had a chance to better herself. The mother’s strategy worked. Beautiful and a nice person, the girl later married a decent fellow who happened to be the son of the man who owned one of the town’s banks.

Meanwhile, when Bernie turned 16, he bought a raggedy old truck with the money he had saved and began hauling gladioli to New Orleans. Soon the old truck became a new truck and the new truck became two trucks and then a rapidly expanding business. By the time Bernie was thirty, he was a millionaire, soon to be a multi-millionaire.

One day he met one of his old classmates on the street, and his classmate told Bernie how proud he was of him. After a short conversation, his old friend said to Bernie, “I’ll make you a bet.” “What’s the bet?” asked Bernie. He would bet on anything. “I’ll bet you don’t put your money in Billy Wakely’s bank.” “You’d lose that bet,” said Bernie. “I put every last nickel in that bank.” “Why would you do that?” asked his friend. “Because I want that so-and-so counting my money,” said Bernie.

There’s something I like about that story. But there’s also something haunting and crushing about it. Bernie had been slighted 25 years before, and the man was still trying to prove that he had won and belonged in that town, that he was good enough to be there, and that he was somebody.

Our Christian faith tells us that our worth is not measured by our winning or losing. In God’s economy, there are no winners or losers, only creatures whom God loves unconditionally.

Secondly, according to our faith, we are reminded that it’s not winning or losing that matters, but whether or not we are found faithful. The Apostle Paul wrote when he was near his death, “I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith.” Paul did not say that he won the fight or that he won the race. He did say that he finished the race and kept the faith.

Some years ago, I attended a track meet that I have never forgotten. The highlight of all the events was the two-mile race. When the starter’s gun sounded, the runners took off. Some got into the lead immediately. As the race continued, many of us in the crowd began to notice one fellow in particular because he was getting farther and farther behind. Finally, he was so far behind that some of the other runners passed him the second time around, and soon the race was over. However, this young man kept right on running. Soon the crowd began to feel a little embarrassed for him. Others laughed about his poor showing. But the young man kept right on running, even though his pace was slower and slower. Now everyone in the crowd was watching him, and the mood of the crowd began to change. We all began to admire the young

man, and by the time that he finished running the two miles, the whole crowd was cheering for him, hoping that he would make it, and he did. He didn't win the race, but he was another kind of hero that afternoon.

Thirdly, remember that Jesus never had anything at all to say about the importance of winning, but he did have something to say about losing. Jesus said, "If anyone would come after me, let that one take up the cross daily and follow me. For those who would save their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives for my sake will save them."

We are found faithful when we give our lives away, and when we do that, we don't worry about whether we are winning or losing.

Hopefully, someday, we, like the Apostle Paul, will be able to say about our lives, "I have fought the good fight; I have finished the race; I have kept the faith." That's all that God asks us to do. Amen.

Discussion Questions:

"Winning is what matters." How pervasive do you think this lie is in our culture? Not only in sports but in business and in our other daily affairs?

The sermon said that a corollary to this lie is: Effort and desire are all that it takes to be a winner. Do you agree? Why or why not?

In what way do the structures of society keep people from being winners?

It is said that sometimes we win by losing. Do you think this is true? Can you give any examples?

How has this lie affected your life? Do you see all of life as a contest? Must there always be winners and losers?

Do you think it's all right for our government to lie to us?