

One of the first sporting events I remember seeing on television was the first Super Bowl on January 15, 1967, when the Green Bay Packers defeated the Kansas City Chiefs 35-10. I was five years-old, almost six, and what I remember isn't the game, so much as my father's reaction to it. It was the first time I saw him dance. My father worshipped Vince Lombardi, the coach of the Green Bay Packers. For years, he wanted my mother to have another baby so he could name it Vince. Boy or girl, it didn't matter. Just so long as he had a child named Vince. Vince Lombardi, you might recall, made famous the saying, "Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing." After the Super Bowl win, my brother Doug drew a picture of a Green Bay Packers helmet, wrote *Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing*, underneath it, and gave it to my father.

Some families hang Bible verses in their homes, our family hung Vince Lombardi quotes. Needle-pointed and framed. Right over the kitchen table. *Winning isn't everything; it's the only thing*. This is how I was raised. Not in a cruel way. When I struck out and cost Baker and Son's the Little League championship, I wasn't yelled at or anything. My father just gave me a book about Vince Lombardi and made me memorize it.

Though I was raised in the church of Vince Lombardi, today I would like to talk about the courage to lose.

This past week, I was making my way from Washington, D.C. over to the mountains of western Virginia, to an Episcopalian conference center. I came upon a road sign that read *Manassas National Battlefield Park*. I had a few hours of extra time, so asked the woman driving me if we could see the battle site and she said “Sure” and took the exit. The Northern Army named their battles for the closest waterway, so referred to that battle as the Battle of Bull Run, after Bull Run Creek, that runs along the eastern border of the battle site. The Southern Army named its battles for the closest town or city, so referred to that battle as Manassas, for the crossroads village 8 miles south of the battlefield, down Sudley Road.

The Battle of Bull Run was the first land battle of the Civil War. Each side believed it would enjoy a glorious and decisive victory, and the war would end quickly with little loss of life. Instead, 847 Americans were killed, 2,706 were wounded, and 1,325 were captured or missing. The fleeing Union Army limped back to Washington, D.C., 30 miles away, the road littered with their broken, bleeding bodies. Among the Northern dead was Col. James Cameron, the brother of President Lincoln's first Secretary of War, Simon Cameron. Within a few days, President Lincoln would order states to conscript half a million new soldiers, and the war was on.

Historians now believe the Civil War might have been avoidable, were it not for the failed presidency of Franklin Pierce, who signed the Kansas-Nebraska Act into law, which divided the nation and pointed it toward civil war. Having publicly committed himself to an ill-considered position, President Pierce maintained it steadfastly, at disastrous cost to his reputation and to the nation. Franklin Pierce had the courage to withstand criticism, but lacking the courage to lose, lacking the courage to admit error, the nation would soon divide.

Pride, and the need to win, the need to be right, the need to win at any cost, the need to do something better and bigger, to be bigger and better, exacts a high and dangerous cost. And few of us are immune from it. When I was in Virginia, I went for a hike one afternoon with a man and woman attending the retreat. As we hiked, we shared stories of our outdoor adventures. Later that night, I was lying in bed, thinking back over the day, and it occurred to me that whenever they had told a story, I felt this odd compulsion to top it. When they mentioned hiking 15 miles one day, I told them about the time I had hiked 20 miles. I had done that several times during our walk. They were nice, kind people. They were not my enemies. There was nothing to be gained by my boasting. I just felt this curious need to best them, to be superior. Where does that come from?

Do you remember the story of when James and John were alone with Jesus? They had been waiting for an opportunity to pull him aside and ask him a question they suspected would anger the other disciples, were they to overhear it. They were thinking of all they have given up to follow Jesus and were hoping for some recognition. Finally alone with him, they asked, “When you rule, when you are in charge, can we rule with you? One of us at your right hand, the other at your left.” It was a large promotion from fisherman to vice-president, but they believed themselves worthy of the advancement. I have the feeling the moment they were in the number two slot, they would aim for the number one position.

There is a reference book published by the American Psychiatric Association called *The Diagnostic and Statistical Manual of Mental Disorders*, in which is listed every known mental disorder. Someday, there will be a disorder in that book known as the Obsessive Need to Win. It will describe how people violate their deepest values in order to win. It will tell how people sacrifice their families, dissolve friendships, wreck their reputations, start wars, turn their backs on the needy, and make a butchery of their conscience, just to win.

It will tell how often the bright lights of truth and justice have been dimmed by our need to win.

It will tell of marriages destroyed, of children orphaned, of rivers and prairies and forests fouled and poisoned by our need to win.

It will tell of entire nations brought to their knees by our need to win.

It will tell of countries who spent so much money on war they could not afford books, so great was their need to win.

It will tell of wealthy corporations who cut jobs, casting tens of thousands of faithful workers into poverty, so great was their need to win.

It will tell of a Pharaoh whose need to win plagued a nation.

It will tell of a Roman governor who let an innocent rabbi be crucified, so great was his need to stay on top.

It might even tell of a Quaker pastor who feels the need to surpass his friends.

I tell you, winning is killing us. I am hoping for the courage to lose. So that we might live beside others, not above them.