

A Theological Reflection on the Winter Olympics

Perhaps some of you followed the recent Winter Olympics. Australia picked up 1 Silver Medal and 2 Bronze Medals, placing us 22nd in the medals tally. Russia topped the list with 13 gold, 11 silver, and 9 bronze. **Pastor Sam Wellumson, Pastor of Christ the King Free Lutheran Church, East Grand Forks, Minnesota**, wrote the following theological reflection on the Winter Olympics:

I find that watching the Winter Olympics is mostly unsatisfying, but not simply because I should be doing more productive things. Maybe it doesn't actually break down this way, but it seems that more than half of the competitions in the Winter Olympics are decided by a panel of judges. Sorry, but that means they aren't sports. Sports are decided by how fast you get down the hill or around the track. Winners are identified by scoring more goals or runs or some other tangible points than the other team.

Complaining about the snowboarders, skiers, and figure skaters have tremendous athletic talent – there is no denying that. But figure skating is an art, and half-pipe snowboarding is impressive, and making competitions out of a stylistic event is, in my maybe-not-so-humble opinion, just silly. How many times have you heard a figure skater or snowboarder say something to the effect of, “I had a great run, but I guess the judges disagreed”? The person who ends up at the top of the podium is almost always debatable.

Time to get to the theological point.

We sinners prefer a salvation that is based on a subjective standard. We prefer to go outside of Scripture and God's election to faith where and when it pleases the Spirit. We think that we will do better on our own, outside of predestination because, then, we get to pick what those standards of salvation are. And we really like to pick who judges according to those standards. If we don't like how this panel of denominational judges do their scoring, then we simply pick another set of judges to fit our needs and desires. When the Scripture's teaching of objective justification is denied, we are left to our own schemes to define what makes us right with God, and the floodgates open. People come up with all sorts of subjective ways to judge what God thinks of them and others. Rather than believing the Gospel delivered in the Sacraments, people are pointed to pseudo-sacraments like their faith, their prayers (like the, “Sinner's prayer”), and their spiritual life.

This theology points sinners inward to themselves and their faith which then becomes something sinners do. When this happens, we can never know for sure who “gets the gold” medal of salvation.

Salvation is not a subjective competition where we get to pick the standards. Salvation comes through justification by Christ who died to justify all sinners (Romans 3:23-24; 5:18-19; 2 Corinthians 5:19). Faith is the means by which we receive Christ's forgiveness.

Faith that justifies entirely gains its worth from its object, Christ. Christ is present in faith, but in a hidden way, that is by means of a simple word. Christ is heard, not seen; even when the disciples had him in plain sight. The word is also not general, it is the concrete promise of Christ, and that promise is always the same: it is the forgiveness of sins to sinners who have no other hope of being right before God. That promise – in order to be believed – must come with a person's own name on it through preaching. Faith is in this particular word of Christ delivered by a preacher for you.¹

¹ Steven D. Paulson. Lutheran Theology (Kindle Locations 1693-1697). Kindle Edition.

Of course the analogy breaks down, as all analogies do. But the plain and simple fact is that Christ is on your team, sinner (Mark 2:17). You win. Christ scored the infinite point on the cross, for you. Christ ran the perfect, unbeatable race, for you.

So, raise your hands in victory as your preacher hangs Baptism, Absolution, and Communion – the gold medal of salvation – around your neck. Take pride as the anthem of Christ is played and the cross is raised.