

As we know, the 2008 summer Olympics are on the way. Every time there are Olympics there is what they call "Olympic Syndrome"; people watch too much TV and do not get enough sleep. And I am one of them; I love the Olympics. People from all over the world come together and do their best competing with each other and we honor them when they accomplish their dreams. I don't know what else could do this: bringing people together from every corner of the planet, regardless of who they are and what they believe in. It is just an amazing thing to have.

It is said that this year there were more than 10,000 athletes from more than 200 countries. Out of these, I don't know how many country names you could remember; I went online and tried to count them and almost 50 names were new to me.

This reminds me of the world we live in; there are countries we know; there are countries we have never heard of before; there are countries big and there are countries small; there are countries rich and strong and there are countries poor and struggling; there are countries who believe what we believe and there are countries who do not; there are countries who are close to us and there are countries who are not that close.

But that is ok. Everyone is welcome and tries their best.

I remember the Olympic Motto from my grade school time: "The most important thing in the Olympic Games is not to win but to take part." That is what is supposed to be; that is what the spirit of the Olympics is about.

But what happens in reality?

We only hear about those who won and those who succeeded. Instead of hearing much about Michael Phelps, who I think is great and deserves all the attention he gets, I also want to hear about other people: the people from those countries I never heard of before. TV

never shows us what happened to those underdogs who tried hard but did not get any medals whatsoever. Newspapers never tell us about what happened to those several countries that only sent just one athlete to the whole Olympic.

But I am not surprised. That is what people do. In a way, that is what the world wants. Even though we talk about all the good things about sports, it is more about money and power. No wonder there are always dirty politics in sports just like in everything else.

Unfortunately, churches are not better either. A Jewish professor said of his tradition, "If there are ten Jewish males in a city we create a synagogue. If there are eleven Jewish males we start thinking about creating a competing synagogue."

A Baptist police officer also said, "One Baptist family in a neighborhood witnesses until they bring another family to Christ. Then they form a church, and start witnessing to the rest of the community. When another family joins, they have a split and form a rival church."

A Methodist business man complemented these two stories by saying, "A man had been shipwrecked for years on a small island. When found by a passing ship, rescuers asked him why he had built three huts, since he was there by himself. "Well," he replied, "that one is my home, that one is my church, and that one is my former church." (Emphasis July/Agust 2008, 44)

It is all about competition; it is all about power; it is all about me winning. I think that is what we humans are. By nature, we humans are not for unity or reconciliation; we talk about it but it hardly happens.

But it does happen. Reconciliation happens.

I think today's Genesis story is the jewel of the whole Old Testament. Just picture yourself sitting in the very room where Joseph is telling his brothers that he is their brother whom they sold years ago.

Joseph could have avenged his brothers for what they did to him years ago; Joseph could have put all of them into a hole underground because that's what they did to him.

But Joseph forgave them. Joseph embraced them. Joseph could not contain his happy feelings when he saw them. So Joseph blessed them with things they could not even imagine.

Joseph turned the story of his competing and cheating brothers into a beautiful story of reconciliation. Joseph saw what other people could not even imagine; he saw the hands of God which had been with his way he had come all along.

Of course, God was behind this beautiful story. As Joseph said, it was God who sent him ahead of his family there in Egypt to save his entire family.

But I am more looking at Joseph. Even if God had been there all along, what if Joseph did not realize this?

I really want to give a credit to Joseph.

It was Joseph's faith to have been able to see what other people did not see; he saw God's hands moving and working in his life; he saw God turn the bad things into good. He saw God's hands leading the way and he wanted to follow that way.

Life is a race; it is a battle; one way or another we try to compete; but we want to play by the rules.

Although his brothers had all the tricks, Joseph could not do it. He wanted to follow the rules all along the way.

One time Joseph was tempted by the wife of Potiphar, the Guard of Royal Prison. But Joseph kept his integrity; he could not betray himself; he could not betray Potiphar, his boss; he could not betray God.

God saw all this. Eventually God lifted up this man to become the prime minister of Egypt. That is big; no wonder this is one of the most popular stories in the Bible. God gave him a gold medal; he became a hero.

But to me, there is a bigger and more important fact here we need to focus on: Joseph's act of forgiving his brothers; he not only reached out to all the underdogs; he shared with them what he had.

The story of Matthew 15 also tells us how difficult it is for us to bring reconciliation. This lady was really the underdog of that time; she was a gentile, a woman (and probably a single mom?)

What bothers me is that even Jesus was using the words, "dogs," toward the woman.

"Lord, have mercy on me; please help my daughter" shouted this poor Canaanite woman. And Jesus says, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." What is this? What is he doing here in the pagan land? Do you think the Son of God who loves everybody would really say that?

Why would Jesus say that? Was he testing to see how they would respond? Why? I don't know. However, one thing is clear: the issue of unity, the issue of reconciliation, was a huge challenge to them just as it is today.

And interesting thing is that Jesus was not in Jerusalem; Jesus was not in Jewish territory; he was there in the middle of non-Jewish area surrounded by non-Jewish people. Then what is this?

And the focus is on this lady who could not stand this bias and social trapping. As soon as this gentile woman challenged Jesus, Jesus responded!

"Lord! Yes, you are right. I may be just one of the dogs. But you have to know this: even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table."

Jesus liked this woman's challenge. And he said, "Great is your faith." After that, Jesus healed the woman's daughter.

We live in a competitive world. Every single moment of our lives is competing with others. Sometimes we need to compete with ourselves; whether I will follow this or that, whether we play by the rules or not, whether we follow God's way or not, we present ourselves so many options and struggles.

In that respect, we have to challenge ourselves. Sometimes we need to ask God a hard question; why not!

God do you really care about me? God, would you really help me?
God help me to forgive! God help me!

I know one thing: when I pray, when I come to God with problems, I know there are more issues with myself. So I sometimes scream and try to challenge myself. When I do that, I feel close to myself and I feel close to God.

When I feel close to God, I feel God listen to me. When I know God is listening to me, I also know that I am forgiven.

When I feel forgiven, I know I can be in a better position to understand others; I can put myself in the position of others; I can even forgive others.

Genesis 45:4-15; Matthew 15:21-28; "God of Unity"; August 17, 2008; Albany UMC

When I can forgive others, I know I am already being used by God as his agent of reconciliation, an agent of unity in this world.

So come before God, there is nothing to be afraid of.

God hears us;

God helps us;

God uses us.

God used Joseph and He can use us too.