Everyone Gets a Trophy!
Holly Jackson
Hope United Church of Christ, Alexandria, VA
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Many of you know that my daughter Chloe is a competitive dancer. She has been since she was 4 years old. Throughout the year she trains between 5-7 days a week learning choreography, honing technique, and strengthening her skills in order to compete in 6 regional competitions during each spring and one national competition each summer. In the summer of 2013 Chloe danced her two solos at Nationals and, because of her dramatic flair (I can’t imagine where she gets that from) she was the title winner for her age and skill division, meaning she caught the judges’ eye for being the most entertaining, with great personality and excellence in her dancing. She was the Ruby Petite Ms. Showbiz for Virginia Beach that summer and as part of her winnings she got to take home a trophy that was taller then she was. We wrestled that trophy into the car and back to the hotel where she gazed at it in awe. We swore that she would have slept with that trophy that night if we would have let her. Now a days that trophy sits in an honored place in her room and she still talks about winning it as one of the highlights of her life so far.

You have to understand that while Chloe is a talented and amazing dancer, especially for an 11 year old, she dances at one of the top competitive dance studios in the nation. At her studio, she isn’t the top dancer, she is pretty solidly middle of the road. So she had never gotten a trophy like that before that was her very own. She had never been recognized like that as an individual dancer. This was the moment I think that she finally felt seen. And that mattered. The trophy was the ultimate symbol of that recognition.

Why exactly do we all seem to get so hung up on trophies? So often I hear about Chloe’s generation, the millenials, in disparaging tones. They are called the trophy kids. The everybody gets a trophy generation. You get a trophy if you win, but more often then not you also just get a trophy for participating. Because of this today’s kids are accused of being entitled. Of thinking they deserve praise no matter what they do. They always got a trophy when they were little so now they will expect the same as they grow up. You’ve heard this right? There is honestly so much disgust about this idea that there is even a book about it now called, NOT EVERYONE GETS A TROPHY: How to Manage Generation Y.

What is it about the idea that everyone gets a trophy that gets people so riled up? There seems to be a few complaints and issues people have with this practice..
If everyone gets a trophy no one will ever actually work. Kids will come to understand they don’t have to work for a reward so why should they go out of their way then?
If everyone gets a trophy it really takes away the value of the trophy. It doesn’t mean anything anymore.
Kids will feel as if they deserve a trophy no matter what they do creating a sense of entitlement.
Giving everyone a trophy goes against the very nature of competition, which is what this country was not only founded on but thrives on in order to continue to grow and innovate (can everyone say protestant work ethic).
We are told that in America if you want to succeed you simply need to work hard. If you are not succeeding then clearly you just aren’t working hard enough. As we have moved through the Great Recession some of this assertion has come under scrutiny. So many people have worked so very hard, but to no avail. But even so the rhetoric about the unemployed, about those in deep debt, continues to
be extremely negative. If you are poor, so the conventional wisdom holds, it’s because you haven’t
made the right choices in life and you just haven’t worked hard enough. It doesn’t help that into this
equation we have now added in this new generation, the millenials, the trophy generation, who often
went to college and incurred large debt, only to be told there are no jobs for them. And of course no one
wants to talk about those who are stuck in a cycle of poverty generations long. The wealthy have
earned their money, we are told. They have worked hard for it. Why should they be forced to share with
those who seemingly don’t work as hard? In real life trophies are only given out to those who win.

Into this mix walks Jesus talking about how things work in God’s realm with a story clearly designed to
stir people up. It’s time for upside down kingdom talk. Because make no mistake this story was as
revolutionary when Jesus says it out loud as it is to us listening to it today. It seems to trample on the
very idea of something being fair. Pay the worker that showed up to do an hour of work the same as the
one that worked hard all day? Here we go again with the everybody gets a darn trophy idea! See, there
really is nothing new under the sun! What is it about seeing other people get something we feel like
either we deserve or that they don’t deserve that makes us so crazy?

One commentary I read this week said, “through our own insecurity and lack of trust we come to
understand and assess our lives not through the abundance we have been given by God but instead by
what we feel we still lack. Because of this gnawing sense of lack, we define ourselves over and against
others, comparing and begrudging their good fortune because it wasn’t our good fortune.” Ouch. But it
stings so much because it’s true.

We don’t celebrate our abundance, we fear our lack. We focus more on what is fair according to our
standards than what is just according to God’s standards. We find it hard to be grateful for what we
have when others get a break and we feel like we have not been able to do the same. When we are on
the receiving end of such generosity, we find it hard to accept it, sure it must come with some
requirements or payback. We want our rewards system to make sense to us. We want to be in control of
it. We want our rewards system to promote the values of competition, hard work, and putting yourself
out there. It’s just that Jesus is very clear. That may be our value system, but it isn’t God’s.

God’s value system is what I demonstrated with the kids up here just a few minutes ago when we
played reverse musical chairs. Adding chairs, not taking them away. Everyone has a seat at the table,
and if more people show up, you don’t tell them they have to get in the back of the line, you move them
to the front and get more chairs. When someone new gets a chair, you don’t spend time comparing their
situation to yours, unless it is to help them out. Instead you clap for them, you are thrilled for them to
finally succeed, to have what they need, to feel seen. You celebrate for them and with them and you
begin to realize: it’s not about me. It’s not about me.

In God’s world, it’s not about me. It’s about putting others first. I don’t have to be upset that you’ve
been paid the same living wage I have been paid even if I worked more hours, because I want you to
succeed. I want you to be able to thrive. I want everyone to have enough. I will celebrate your win as if
it was my own. Yes, you get a trophy too.

Understand that – God doesn’t give out the equivalent of a trophy here because they deserve it, or
because they were entitled to it, or because God was afraid for their self esteem. God gives out
trophies, and living wages, because God loves being generous. God loves seeing us thrive and be happy
and be seen. God loves watching as we live out God’s love and glory. God doesn’t believe that if we all
get something that we will feel entitled and no one will work ever again. God thinks we will recognize
and appreciate the generosity we have been given and we will work even harder in gratitude as we all
pull each other up and along. God’s love isn’t a finite commodity. And we don’t have to be in
competition for it.

Love, whether this is the love of one person for another, or God’s love of us – is not divisible. Nobody
gets more of God’s love than anyone else. Each one of us gets it all. No matter who you are or where you are on your spiritual journey, God wants to love you. We want to love you. Heck, I’d even give you a trophy if I had one. Yes, Chloe loves her trophy. She loves having actually won. But more importantly, I think, she loves the feeling of being named, of being recognized, of being seen. Isn’t that what we all want? Can’t we celebrate not just when it happens to us but when it happens to our neighbors? Can we realize that we are God’s beloved, but so is the person next to us? And that doesn’t take away from us in any way? We are enough and so is everyone else.

We are challenged by Paul to live a life worthy of the Gospel. This, this crazy mixed up story where God’s generosity is over the top so that all of us can succeed, is the gospel. The problem is do we live it in this world right now? It’s a challenge we’re each going to play with for a few minutes. I want to give you a quick exercise today to help us work on this radical love idea Jesus is always on about. I got this idea off a blog called Working Preacher in an article by David Lose. It isn’t my idea and that is perfectly wonderful.

You all have two 3×5 cards. On one of those cards I want you to write some resentment, some grudge you hold in you hearts, something you believe you lack, or something of which you are envious. Some way in which you are struggling not to simply shout, “It isn’t fair! Why should they get a trophy?” And I know that sounds like a three year old, but I also know we all have felt it even as adults so I invite you to be honest, because honesty matters. Then write on the other card write two things. First, some blessing, some area of abundance, something for which you are grateful, in your own lives. Even if it is only for the very air we breathe. What are you grateful for? Then just as importantly, think about someone else – what are their blessings, their abundance that you can be thankful for? Or if they are struggling what could you do to help them live in abundance? This is the equivalent of you clapping for them. I’m going to wait a minute until you are done.

Once you are done, hold each of those cards face down in the palm of each hand. Notice with them that, physically, the two cards weigh the same. Yet spiritually, existentially, one of those cards is weighing you down, like chains secured to an anchor wrapped tightly around your hearts, while the other is light as a feather. Now when it comes time for the offering put one of these cards in the plate as it passes you by. Because to live the life God wants you to live, you can’t keep both; you have to choose which of these two is more important to you, your lack or your abundance and the abundance of others. Give one of those cards away by putting it in the plate and take the other home as a reminder. I promise I won’t read the ones left behind, I will just discard of them. Take the card you have left home as your reminder to live a life worthy of the Gospel of Jesus Christ. Take it home as your trophy. Put it in a place of honor and know you are loved and seen. Amen.