

How many of you have heard of the World Cup? For every one of us who raises our hand in response to that question, I would be willing to bet that all of us are thinking about the FIFA World Cup for the sport of European football or, as we Americans call it, soccer. There is no doubt that the FIFA World Cup is a huge event, one the few occasions in the world that is truly international. Surprisingly, however, when I was researching the words “World Cup,” I discovered that there are multiple such international events for a broad spectrum of competitions.

There is a Chess World Cup; a Show Jumping World Cup in the equestrian field; a Rugby World Cup; a Netball World Cup, which is something like basketball but not the same; there is a Table Tennis World Cup; an Archery World Cup; an Electronic Sports World Cup; there is a Kabbadi World Cup, and after my research, I still have no idea what Kabbadi is; I just know that it is the national sport of Bangladesh. I counted at least 100 World Cups, yet most of us have probably only heard of the one – the FIFA World Cup. Why do you think that is?

Could it be that the reason just about everyone has heard of the soccer World Cup, played every four years, is because it involves more nations than any other sporting event on earth? The FIFA World Cup is truly global, even in the United States, where more people are passionately following it. When we think about the fact that there are 7 ½ billion people currently on the planet, it is amazing that close to half of the planet, 3.2 billion viewers, watch all or some part of the World Cup – but then the World Cup happens only once every four years, and it is on the internet and on television.

There is another World Cup that has close to the same number of participants, but there are some startling differences. This other World Cup is not something that is viewed

on television, the internet, or a stadium, but one that is shared face to face. This other World Cup does not happen once every four years, but regularly – in fact, this World Cup happens somewhere in the world every day, in gatherings large and small. Even more remarkable, this two billion plus World Cup occurs among people all over the planet who share one particular idea, and have been sharing that idea for over 2000 years.

Today we come together in this place to share the true World Cup, which has been given to Christians by the one we worship as the Son of God – Jesus of Nazareth. In our scripture this morning from the gospel of Luke, we hear Jesus share a remarkable vision of the kingdom of God, a vision which we celebrate and anticipate this morning as we gather with sister and brother Christians all over the world.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus was constantly being asked about judgment and salvation, and this teaching from Luke begins with a similar question: “Lord, will only a few be saved?” Jesus does not answer the question directly, but instead gives an answer for everyone who follows him: “Strive to enter through the narrow door; for many, I tell you, will try to enter and will not be able.” Jesus presents discipleship and salvation as that for which we are to “strive,” or to put it another way, we are to work hard for it. Salvation is neither cheap nor easy. Jesus showed us the truth of this striving in his own arrest, judgment, and crucifixion.

Christ then presents an apocryphal vision of many who seek salvation simply from some knowledge of God. Most of that unproductive knowledge is grounded on adherence to the rules or laws of various religions that claim to have the path to salvation. But Jesus makes it clear that mere religion leads neither to communion with God or salvation. Rather,

salvation is a matter of faith, and faith is something that we must strive for, or literally in the Greek, “agonize” for in every moment of life. Jesus is saying that salvation is not a matter of religion, but of relationship, and relationships are never easy.

Christ then concludes the vision with wonderful news – that there are and will be many who have the right relationship for salvation, and they will be gathered from every point of the compass to feast with God both for this time and for eternity: “Then people will come from east and west, from north and south, and will eat in the kingdom of God.” This morning we are reminded that we are in relationship with every Christian believer in existence and for all time. The binding force of this relationship is not religion, history, or tradition, but our mutual faith that Jesus Christ is the Son of God, and our mutual commitment to live as Christ has taught us.

This World Cup that we share was not won in competition, but given to us out of love through the grace of Jesus Christ, and so we lift it this morning not in victory, but in humble thanksgiving. We lift it as a part of our commitment to strive for the kingdom of God, and to acknowledge that Christian discipleship is a narrow, rocky path, filled with obstructions, detours, and misdirection. That is why we do not journey on this path alone, but with the Holy Spirit and with every sister and brother who confesses Christ as Savior. Are we ready to lift the World Cup this morning? Are we willing to strive, to agonize, for our faith? Are we willing to join the billions from east, west, north and south this day in proclaiming with our lives not what we do, but who we love, and all the work that comes with it? There are many World Cups, but only one that binds the world in love.

