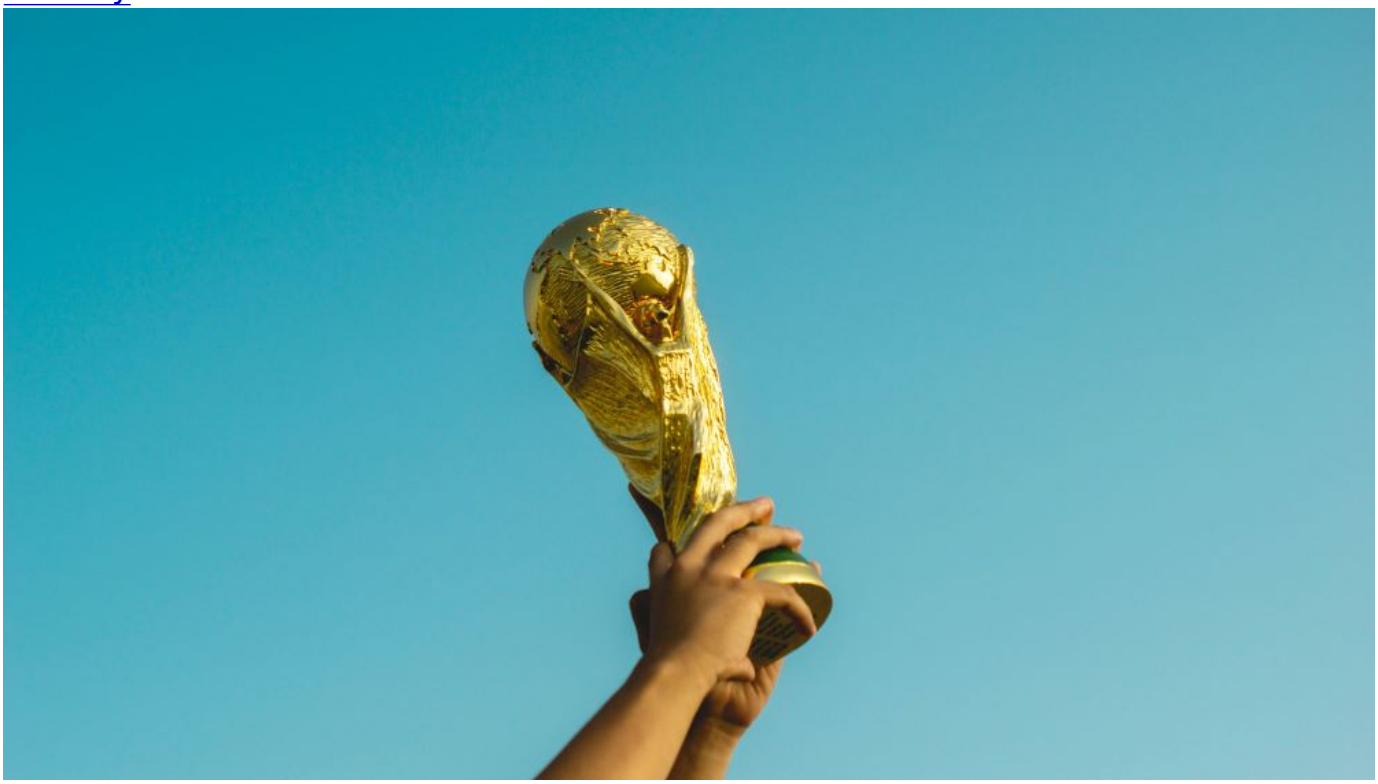
Columns
Ministry



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On a recent rare afternoon with no commitments or projects that needed completion, I found myself mindlessly flipping through the television channels. I was

stunned to see how many shows were competition based. There are competitions for performance, cooking and baking, even dating. Some "winners" are declared by so-called experts on the shows, and some are declared by viewer input.

Charity fundraisers at my place of ministry are competitive. This past winter the group that brought in the most pairs of new socks for a local shelter was awarded a dress-down day. Full disclosure, I was part of the "winning group" with 400 pairs collected. The competition was friendly and was meant to motivate folks to donate.

Do not get me wrong; competition is fine and can be healthy. I enjoy watching American football and also support the teams my students play for. That said, I started to wonder if everything must be a competition. What has happened to collaboration? Or, maybe even more rare, simple sharing?

Children compete for their parent/guardian's attention. In our not-so-distant history, even we as sisters got into the act. Think about seating in chapel or the dining room; order by "years in" can be seen as sort of a competition. Many an office displays awards won, another kind of competition. I'm sure we can all still find examples in our own lives when we compete in both healthy and less than healthy ways.

Three major grocery chains operate in my area. They compete for shoppers with their varied sales and rewards programs. I plan my grocery shopping accordingly; it's beneficial to save money. Credit card companies compete, offering cash back or other rewards. Restaurants offer "frequent buyer" programs, rewarding people for patronage. Competition is everywhere.

> How do we shift the focus from winning or being first to doing our best and/or contributing to the greater good?
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Lest we think competition is new, examples can be found in Scripture. Martha competes for Jesus' attention just as her sister Mary has (Luke 10:38-42), even asking Jesus to tell Mary to come help. Zebedee's wife asks Jesus to grant her sons places of honor (Matthew 20:20-28), ahead of all the others. And even the day laborers compete for salary (Matthew 20:1-16).

I started to pay attention. When do I observe or participate in competition, and, more importantly, what is the motivation behind it? In the United States, the only lived reality I can speak from, no one wants to finish in second place, third is worse, and after that no one even takes notice. How do we shift the focus from winning or being first to doing our best and/or contributing to the greater good?

I started small, collecting hygiene items for my ministry outreach project. I encouraged my group to contribute what they could by simply adding to the box. There was to be no check-off list or tally of who brought what or how much. Initially, there was some resistance, but within a few days, the box was overflowing and a second started. When the project ended, I debriefed with a few group members. I wanted to know about the experience that gained momentum almost exponentially.

The debrief responses were obvious. Those of limited means were able to contribute without feeling judged. The person who brought in a pair of toothbrushes because that was all she could afford this month wasn't looked down upon. No one knew who brought them. The person who brought a case of feminine pads also got no acknowledgement. By their own admission that stung a little until they saw the excitement of other team members as the box overfilled.

Discussions continued. Gradually we all, myself included, came to realize encouraging each other and celebrating every contribution, no matter how seemingly insignificant, was fun. Is it important to put forth our best effort? Most definitely. Does that mean anything short of first place is a failure? Definitely not.

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Going back to the initial examples:

- Parents/guardians make time for each child individually and together. A simple lesson on sharing helps: "I'm with Jimmy now. In 20 minutes, I'll be with you, and he has to wait. Then we can all do something together."
- Sitting in different places in chapel helps us meet different people and gives a different sensual experience of prayer. I know I see and hear and feel and pray differently in the choir loft vs. the main floor vs. the sanctuary.
- Martha and Mary turn meal prep into a group activity for all. I can hear the giggles as everyone works to create, and eventually clean up, an intimate meal

with their friends. After all, Jesus cooked fish on the shoreline. Some of my most cherished visits with friends are when we prepare snacks/meals together.

The possibilities are endless when we shift the focus just a little. Will I still cheer for my favorite team? Yes. Will I still look for the best price? Of course. Will I ignore who contributes how much as long as the goal is met? Most definitely. Competition can be fun, but it can also be heartbreaking. I know where I want my focus to be. What about you?