

At the 10 am service on July 18, 2010, The Rev. Cornel Barnett delivered the following sermon based on 1 Corinthians 15:54-57 and Luke 7:18-28.

“Viva España/Viva Jesus”

Most of us know that I have been using 2010 FIFA World Cup soccer illustrations and analogues in my sermons during the tournament which lasted from June 11 to July 11. The final game between Holland and Spain took place after worship last Sunday and the Monday morning San Francisco Chronicle headlined the sports section with the phrase “Viva España,” thus, my sermon title: “Viva España/Viva Jesus”

Today is my last sermon in the series. The winner of the World Cup, Spain, takes center stage and provides three analogues for our life in Christ. After speaking about these I shall conclude with a couple of World Cup stories that reflect the best of persons and our faith.

The best team won the coveted World Cup and also received the “fair play” award. If the realm of God or God’s church was a soccer team it would look good if it was the Spanish team. They played with finesse. The communication and understanding among players was superb. The passing was great and the spirit buoyant. The players cared for each other and celebrated with great gusto. They were real winners.

For Paul we are winners in Christ. We know the taste of victory. Speaking from a broader context – that of death which is not our subject today – Paul nevertheless affirms our victory in Christ. He writes:

“When this perishable body puts on imperishability, and this mortal body puts on immortality, then the saying that is written will be fulfilled:

“‘Death has been swallowed up in victory.’

‘Where, O death, is your victory?

Where, O death, is your sting?’

“The sting of death is sin, and the power of sin is the law. But thanks be to God, who gives us the victory through our Lord Jesus Christ.”

Our victory in Christ is victory over ways we have hurt, destroyed, devalued or dehumanized life *when* we bring these to God in prayers of confession. God’s grace and mercy forgives us and frees us to live as winners against anything that wants to harm or destroy us.

Viva España/Viva Jesus.

Spain scored again in the “players to watch” category. The goalkeeper and captain of the team, Iker Casillas was described by Time Magazine at the beginning of the tournament as “perhaps the world’s best goalkeeper...His keen reflexes are key to his nation’s chances for a first Cup win.”

It was precisely these reflexes that saved one of Holland's sure goals in the final game when the orange-clad Arjen Robben, Holland's biggest danger, had an open field with only Casillas to beat and he shot the ball into the net but Casillas reflexively threw his body into the air and the ball bounced off his left foot and spun outside of the net. Casillas fulfilled every other criterion as one of Time magazine's players to watch.

The 2010 World Cup Guide magazine called Casillas one of the players you have to see to believe.

In this sense Casillas has become a Jesus figure, not because of his religiosity but because he was consistently magnificent throughout the tournament. In my sermon on players to watch I pointed to Jesus as a player to watch.

In the Gospel text, John's disciples are sent by John to ask Jesus if he is the one to come or should they look for another. John hadn't seen Jesus at play. The plays are outlined in the text. We read: "Jesus had just then cured many people of diseases, plagues, and evil spirits, and had given sight to many who were blind. And Jesus answered them, 'Go and tell John what you have seen and heard: the blind receive their sight, the lame walk, the lepers are cleansed, the deaf hear, the dead are raised, the poor have good news brought to them.'"

In soccer World Cup terms, Jesus had done what he had come for. With superb spirit he out-dribbled his opponents, displayed great gifts, received and passed the ball with finesse and scored amazing goals.

Jesus is our role model. His ministry is effective and consistent in word and deed and we are encouraged to follow him in these.

Viva España/Viva Jesus.

The last example from Spain's final performance came as an outcome of the goal scored by Andrés Iniesta. It is not far-fetched to say that it was a symbol of the resurrection. The San Francisco Chronicle describes it in this way:

"When Iniesta celebrated the winning goal by ripping off his jersey, his undershirt revealed the name of Dani Jarque, a Spanish player who died of a heart attack last year, and the words *siempre con nosotros* ("always with us").

None of us knew that throughout the game this brilliant player was inspired by the spirit of his former team mate just as we are inspired by Jesus who died and rose again. Printed on the invisible undershirt of every Christian is the name Jesus Christ and the phrase *siempre con nosotros* ("always with us").

Viva España/Viva Jesus.

In conclusion a couple of World Cup stories worthy of Christian lore.

The World Cup was full of family stories: of brothers chosen for the same team (for example, the Dos Santos brothers of Mexico but one of the brothers, Jonathan, was unable to play because of an injury); of father/son relationships as in US coach Bob Bradley and player Michael; of father-in-law relationships as in Holland's coach Bert van Marwijk and player Mark van Bommel. The Boateng brothers played on different teams: Jerome for Germany and Derek for Ghana.

Akin to the Iniesta story is this from the Honduran squad. After joining his two brothers on the Honduran team (that's three brothers on one team – an amazingly talented family) Jerry Palacios said he was playing in the World Cup for the brother they lost.

Edwin Palacios, the youngest of Honduras' soccer-playing brothers, was kidnapped and murdered three years ago. "He's an angel," Jerry said ahead of their group game against Spain. "He always gives us strength. When we're down we feel that he's with us. And that's additional motivation for the family."

The second story is behind every goal scored by Uruguayan Diego Forlán who happened to win the Golden Boot Award for the most goals scored at the World Cup. The tally was five goals and three assists. Three other players scored as many goals but had less assists so Forlán won.

Forlán dedicates every goal he scores in soccer to his sister who was paralyzed in an accident when she was 12 years old. He has vowed to make enough money from soccer to pay her medical bills for the rest of her life. Having been voted the best player of the 2010 FIFA World Cup he has no problem in earning the funds. Hindus call this good karma. Christians call it consequences of a kind and generous heart.

The gospel communicates good news through a father/son or two brothers and a father story famously called the prodigal or lost son story. There is good news in soccer and certainly good news in the gospel of Jesus Christ.

Viva World Cup/Viva Jesus! This ends this series of sermons inspired by the gospels and the 2010 FIFA World Cup. Amen.