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WHEN GOODS BECOME GODS: FRACTURED IDENTITIES AND THE CALL FOR SAFE SPACES IN SPORTS

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ABSTRACT

What is the relationship between identity, idolatry, wholeness, and community? What are the ways in which sports culture bolsters or misdirects God-given identity? How can leaders in sports cultivate authentic, loving community that provides athletes safe spaces to explore and discern messages from the world and truth from God? In this paper, we will explore existential questions such as these. First, we will describe how identity is inherently physiological, psychological, social, and spiritual, developing subconsciously through explicit and implicit messaging. Then, we will explore the ways in which sports – organized play, human creation, and a good gift from God – can become an idol, and how idolatry both stems from and perpetuates fragmented identity. Next, we will explain what a life of wholeness means for sportspeople. Lastly, we will conclude with recommendations for leaders in sports to provide authentic and safe communities driven by love and faithfulness.

Keywords: Identity, Idolatry, Safe places, Wholeness

Introduction

What is the relationship between identity, idolatry, wholeness, and community? What are the ways in which sports culture bolsters or misdirects God-given identity? How can leaders in sports cultivate authentic, loving community that provides athletes safe spaces to explore and discern messages from the world and truth from God? In this paper, we will explore existential questions such as these. First, we will describe how identity is inherently physiological, psychological, social, and spiritual, developing subconsciously through explicit and implicit messaging. Then, we will explore the ways in which sports – organized play, human creation, and a good gift from God – can become an idol, and how idolatry both stems from and perpetuates fragmented identity. Next, we will explain what a life of wholeness means for sportspeople. Lastly, we will conclude with recommendations for leaders in sports to provide authentic and safe communities driven by love and faithfulness. Ultimately, the position of this paper is that human beings thrive when living *from* an identity of love and acceptance instead of living *for* approval and belonging. Leaders in sports are invited to offer safe spaces in authentic community to promote wholeness.

Identity: How Developmental Messages Script Identity

In the following section, we briefly examine identity development from a biological, psychological, social, and spiritual perspective. Human beings are born without an awareness of

their God-given identity and, therefore, realize their identity in the developmental years of childhood (Erikson, 1959; Erikson, 1968; Meeus, 2011; McLean & Pasaputhi, 2012). Human beings subconsciously pick up on the messages they receive from their environment and internalize those messages into an identity “glued together by life” (LeDoux, 2003, p. 3). Psychiatrist Curt Thompson (2015) reminds readers of humankind’s deepest longing to be seen, known, and loved even before a person has words to communicate those needs. Human beings are made for connection and, therefore, spend their lives in search of that someone (or something or many things) that provides love, belonging, meaning, and purpose. Thompson (2015) suggests that we enter this world looking for someone looking for us until we perceive that we are safe, secure, and found.

The Holistic Nature of Human Identity

Beginning at an early age, the complex narrative of belonging and fulfillment is written into the fabric of our being, our mind, body, and soul. Identity is physiological, psychological, social, and spiritual. Identity and the narratives we adopt about ourselves are not just theological issues. Rather, identity is stored in our physical brain; affected by roles, abilities, and self-understanding; connected to sexuality, relationships, community membership, gender, and race; and determined by our beliefs which direct our motivations and actions through our bodies (Sinden 2012; Shogan, 1999; Weiss, 2011). Whether people receive messages of acceptance or rejection determines whether they live a life operating *from* love or *for* love.

Identity as Physiological

Identity is physiological in the way that it is written in the pathways of our brains. Over the last several years, a significant body of research has demonstrated how a person’s lived experiences, both the good and the bad, impact the physiology of the brain (see van der Kolk, 2014). Neuroplasticity is the brain’s ability to adapt and efficiently create shortcuts that reinforce and make easier a person’s lived experiences (Eagleman, 2020). Neuroplasticity makes it especially easy to brush your teeth with your dominant hand, drive the same route to work without paying attention, and make a free throw with ease. Neuroplasticity also traps people who have endured trauma in their fight-flight-freeze response, activating the brain’s fear center in the amygdala and the body’s stress response via the sympathetic nervous system (Kolassa & Elbert, 2007). In this way, identity is written into the physical brain in the way that neuroplasticity facilitates much of human cognition and behavior (Medina, 2008).

Identity as Psychosocial

Identity is psychological and social in the way that a person presents cognitive and emotional responses based on his or her surroundings. Van der Kolk (2014) explains how the brain develops from the bottom-up beginning in the womb, meaning the brain first develops its most basic parts, the areas that are highly responsive to threat. Human beings have an evolutionary tendency to move toward perceived safety and acceptance while constantly receiving and interpreting information from the world around them (Cosmides & Tooby, 2000). In this way, other people help to define how we view ourselves. Taking in messages from the environment and social setting, human beings develop narrative self-concepts (McAdams, 1988;

McLean & Pasaputhi, 2012). Over time, patterns of cognition and emotion are developed in the mind and form what we call our identity.

Patterned messages from the social environment play a large role in giving the language for and forming identity, while also determining how a person fits into a larger narrative and searches for love (McLean & Jennings, 2012; Taylor, 1989, pp. 34-39). If these patterns are grounded in safety, love, and belonging, then behavior will reflect a secure identity. Taking in social messages of acceptance, human motivation will operate *from* love and not *for* love. On the one hand, human beings who believe they are loved and accepted can live freely without pervasive fear of rejection. On the other hand, if messages of shame, danger, and fear are hard-wired into our subconscious networks, the drive to discover love and meaning is exacerbated. Put simply, what we do becomes a contractual, transactional, or conditional agreement associated with performance. Internally the question that the self asks is, “what do I have to do to earn love?” Or, subconsciously, “what do I have to do, based on certain socially scripted patterns of thought and behavior, to solicit acknowledgement, acceptance, and approval from those in power around me?” This narrative of looking for love continues on this trajectory in every station of life, whether it be school, sports, relationships, jobs, etc. The human soul continues to seek love and belonging and does not stop until it finds it (Augustine, 2005). The conditional agreement associated with performance might work temporarily but is an exhausting solution that requires continuous striving. Sports are a particularly salient domain in which a person can perform in order to gain almost immediate praise and acceptance or reproach and dismissal (Null, 2008; Null, 2016).

Identity as Spiritual

Identity is an inherently spiritual issue on an ontological level in the way that faith in God provides a specific narrative about who we are (Kelsey, 2009; Snodgrass, 2018). Christians cling to the notion that God loved, created, chose, called, saved, and is sanctifying his people. However, even as Christians, though we give intellectual assent that God loves us and we claim that as our identity, our physiological, psychological, and social scripts often tell us otherwise. Allender (2006) contends that the kingdom of this world names us and gives us an identity, yet we do not truly know ourselves. This duplicity is either unknown, or people strain to avoid the displeasure and pain of not being seen, known, and loved. The world gives people an identity, but God bestows a different one. How should Christians respond to these two different, conflicting narratives about identity? More specifically, how do Christian sportspeople respond to these two different, conflicting narratives? Identity development determines whether people thrive or fracture from the inside-out. The way people are formed directly relates to how they flourish or continue to seek love in all the wrong places.

Case Study Part I

Consider the athletically gifted adolescent volleyball player. She grew up in a family of nine with divorced parents, playing a variety of sports. Her mother was too tired to pay attention to her, yet she was able to get attention from other adults via athletic accolades. The athlete was talented and loved sports for the joy of competition, but she eventually learned subconsciously to use sports to fill a void in her soul. She learned that if she worked hard, then she could succeed in

everything she tried; and if she found success, her coaches and the fans would notice her talent and praise her, filling her need for love, belonging, and acceptance that she rarely received at home.

When Goods Become Gods: How Idolatry Fractures Identity

Identity forms holistically involving environmental messages and social scripts. In this section, we explore the ways that idolatry fragments a person's identity. Idolatry occurs when humans elevate an earthly good and expect it to offer fulfillment and salvation. People's identities fragment when they turn God's good gifts into idols and lack supportive, authentic community. Sports culture can either be a source of respite or perpetuate this problem. Allen and Ashburn (2010) denote the illusion and power of idols as providing a false sense of adequacy and importance. Even so, Allen and Ashburn (2010) point out how idols ultimately deplete and dominate, stripping us of dignity, meaning, and value (p. 18). In addition to the influences of childhood developmental stages and family of origin, the cultural influences of competitive, consumeristic culture also influence people's identity formation (Hoffman, 2010; Null, 2016).

The conviction in sports culture to prioritize winning over wellness is harmful in general, but even more so when combined with an attitude of works-based righteousness and learned disposition of soliciting transactional, conditional love that determines a person's worth and value. Said another way, we are only as good as our last game. Our emotional, psychological, and spiritual survival depends on whether or not we can attain our soul's deepest longings of love and acceptance. Admittedly, competitive sports require performance and execution. However, the ends of attaining higher standards can never justify the means of getting there (White, 2008). In other words, requiring execution and mastery of skill is good and can form character in a positive direction; however, when the motivational practices such as shame and anger are used to reach a higher level, God's law of love is violated, and athletes' identities are damaged (Hoffman, 2010; Null, 2016). Leaders and coaches can treat others with dignity and respect and, at the same time, require execution. When people desperately want to be loved and cannot resist the lure of performance-based identity, they trade their successes for love and form their identity based on the world's definition of success (Houltberg et al., 2018; Null, 2008; Null, 2016). This transaction often takes place without awareness or conscious choice.

When sports become idolatrous, people are quick to wonder how sports can serve them. When people believe that sports promise ultimate meaning, fulfillment, and love, they elevate sports to an idol. German theologian Paul Tillich (1968) defined idolatry in terms of confusing an earthly, penultimate concern with the "ultimate concern" (p. 16). Idolatry of sports views sports instrumentally, disregarding the fact that sports are autotelic, good gifts from God (Goheen, 2003; White, 2018). The Apostle Paul admonishes believers to keep God as the giver and sustainer of all of life, not any man-made object of desire (Rom 1:22-23a). Sports, like all idols, over-promise and under-deliver because they were never intended to give us what only God can. When winning, success, money, and reputation become the end, the culture of sport will continue to orient us away from God's script for human flourishing and lead us toward a path of idolatry. Benner (2015) argues that idolatry involves displacing God so that we can become a god, resulting in the formation of a "false self" (p. 74). Idols promise fulfillment but leave people empty because only a "whole and entire" allegiance to God will satisfy the human heart (Meilaender, 2006).

Case Study Part II

Again, consider the talented volleyball player who learned from an early age how to earn love and acceptance through her on-court performance. The longer she played, the less she could differentiate *playing well* and *being worthy*, nor could she distinguish *playing poorly* and *being worthless*. Subconsciously, she learned through the process of only receiving affirmation through success that her identity was her performance and sports were her god. Volleyball was the only space in which she felt seen and valued, although her sense of value was contingent on her playing well. On the outside, she was dedicated to the game. On the inside, she was desperate for the game because she believed that being the best on the team and competing at the highest level in volleyball was her only path to meaning, purpose, and belonging. She slowly found herself needing the game as much as loving the game.

Disintegration: How We Use Sports to Hide Our False Self

Idolatry fragments the soul because it directs identity away from God. In this section, we examine the disintegration that occurs when a person expects earthly goods to lead to ultimate fulfillment. A fractured identity leads to a disintegrated life. Disintegration occurs when misdirected loves (i.e., idolatry) cause greater fracture in our identity and prevent us from being who we are created to be. We are made *for* and *from* love (Harvey, 2014). Yet, when we attach our ultimate longings and loves to earthly goods, especially at a young age, those loves form our identity either toward God (i.e., integrated soul) or away from God (i.e., disintegrated soul). Excessive and inordinate attachment to good earthly things (e.g., winning, success, skill, self-mastery, knowledge, etc.) disintegrates the human soul because idolatry over-promises and under-delivers (Benner, 2015). Quaker sociologist and author Parker Palmer (2004) puts it this way: “the divided life, at bottom, is not a failure of ethics. It is a failure of human wholeness” (p. 7). When we misplace our love, we misplace our identity and experience disintegration.

Disintegration occurs when we stiff-arm God and attempt to live independently from our Creator. Living independently from our Creator requires us to figure out ways to cope with our nakedness (Benner, 2015). We utilize whatever is most accessible to cover up our guilt, fear, and shame (Gen 3:9-11). Given that athletic identity is salient for most athletes, sports performance and acclaim often function as a mask for the false, disintegrated self. The question God asked in Genesis, “Where are you?” is not a matter of geography but identity (Gen 3:9). All too often, the true self, like Adam and Eve, goes into hiding and stays there. We develop the false self and become divided, attempting to serve two masters. Said another way, the false self is what we develop in our own likeness, the person we would like to be without God, the person of our own creation, the person we would create if we were God (Benner, 2015, pp. 74-75). But such a person cannot exist because he or she is an illusion.

Sportspeople often use sports as a means to ultimate fulfillment (Hoffman, 2010; Weir, 2008). If we try to validate our worthiness through the pursuit of success on the field as a way to keep the painful and powerless part of ourselves hidden, we will continue to invest in the false self, only resulting in greater division of the soul. The greater the deficit and need for satisfied longings, the more urgently a person will expect an earthly good to fill the dark hole within. The disintegrated life is one in which the soul is not in harmony with the mind, heart, or body. Disintegration connotes a wounded soul, and people attempt to numb their pain through a variety of anesthetics (Palmer, 2004, p. 20). Sports can bring great joy but were never meant to become

the solution to satisfying our deepest longings (White, 2018). Something must fill the void within, and whenever we choose people or activities such as sports to be the ultimate source of happiness and joy, we end up more alone and dissatisfied (Nouwen, 2007, p., 32). Theologically, expecting sports to satisfy the soul involves orienting good desires toward a telos that ultimately cannot satisfy (White, 2018). We desire created goods, namely experiences in sports, to make meaning in life without God, resulting in disintegration. Awareness of the goodness of God leads to integration, but trying to satisfy our false self with earthly goods leads to greater disintegration.

People with fractured identities do not fully know themselves or share themselves with others. People tend to hide their fractured identities, furthering the fracture and deepening the disintegration (Benner, 2015; Pennington, 2005). Dividedness seeps into our families and communities, undermining morale, relationships, and vocation (Palmer, 2004, p. 17). People hide their souls from each other *and* from themselves, resulting in fragmentation and disintegration. Sports can function as a mask that hides internal disintegration, covering the false self with ephemeral accolades. When sports are expected to fulfill one's soul, the soul fragments even further, catching within a vicious cycle of athletic success hiding the false self.

Case Study Part III

The volleyball player earned a full scholarship to compete collegiately. She was a star, earning All-American accolades. Even so, she was unaware of the fissures in her own soul. She was oblivious to the fact that her intense volleyball pursuits were filling unmet needs from childhood and widening the fragment between her true and false self. She believed that she mattered because she was one of the best in the country. However, after a few injuries and the close of her college career, she was left wondering, "who am I without volleyball?" The newspaper stopped writing about her, and the fans ceased their cheering. What she thought had provided her love and meaning was an illusion, a false self built on props that would eventually fail.

Integration: Unifying the Divided Soul in Safe Spaces

Having discussed the disintegrated soul, in this section we turn to integration and what it looks like to have integrity and wholeness in sports. The goal is to move towards wholeness and integration, to work *from* a position of love and not *for* love. Human beings pursue integration by orienting identity towards God and processing the true self in safe spaces within community.

Orienting Our Identities Towards God

Human beings flourish when they orient their identity and worship towards God. Borrowing from Augustine's order of loves, Smith (2016) suggests that we discern our true aim, identify our loves and attachments, and offer space to learn about and love the whole person. Smith (2016) elaborates that, "You want what you love because you live toward what you want...to be human is to be a lover and to love something ultimate" (p. 13). Often, in Christian practices, we use sin-management techniques instead of understanding what drives a person to find love and fulfillment. Integration starts with identifying and naming ultimate loves and is realized by orienting worship towards God.

Integrity stems from purity of heart and being fully known and accepted by God. Danish theologian and philosopher Kierkegaard (1956) reminds us that a unified soul only exists when God is our ultimate object of love; we cannot serve two masters. Kierkegaard challenges motivations, orientations, and competing allegiances by offering insight into what brings unity to the soul. Drawing upon the biblical themes of purity of heart (Matthew 5:8) and double-mindedness (James 4:8), Kierkegaard claims that God alone must be the ultimate *telos*, the highest goal, and the only means of obtaining purity or wholeness. Since God's essence is perfect and immutable, the soul that seeks him first and foremost is unified (White, 2008). Purity of heart means integrity to our God-given identity.

Integration offers people freedom from idolatry and the burden of having to prove their worth. Keeping God as the ultimate love and aim is to begin flourishing. As theologian Abraham Kuyper (1998) writes, "There is not a square inch in the whole domain of our human existence over which Christ, who is Sovereign over all, does not cry, 'Mine!'" (488). God lays claim on our lives, including our sports experiences, as Creator, and invites his creation to an eternal covenant relationship (1 John 4:19). Responding to God's sacrificial love frees us to not seek out earthly goods to satisfy our deepest longings. We already have what we need; therefore, we are free to compete without our identity at stake. Competing to prove one's value is a cumbersome state of being. For example, in *Chariots of Fire* (1981) right before the Olympic 100-meter dash, Harold Abrahams despondently exclaims, "In ten lonely seconds, I have to justify my whole existence." God did not design human beings with the intention that we would have to continuously validate our worthiness through our own doing. Rather, God offers us unconditional love and acceptance regardless of our performance.

Integrated people embrace God-given identity and are free to engage in authentic relationships. From the perspective of Christian theology, wholeness stems from justification in which believers are declared right with God as a gift received by faith (Ephesians 2:8). Furthermore, sanctification involves living out one's God-given identity and deepening one's relationship with Christ (Romans 8:1-4; 12:1,2). Moreover, sanctification also involves recognizing how defensive and compulsive attitudes and behaviors preserve the false self rather than the new self that is joined to Christ (Benner, 2015). In the New Testament, the language of being "in Christ" (Eph 3:12, 4:32; Col 1:28) denotes a mystical union for which Christ unites us to him with this new shared life resulting from his death and resurrection (Campbell, 2012; Horton, 2011). A Christian's secured identity in Christ liberates them from hiding under a false self and liberates them for living authentically as their true self. Etymologically, integration stems from the same Latin root as the mathematical term, "integer." Both terms connote wholeness and completion. An integrated soul enables authentic connection with oneself and community. When we orient our love and lives towards God, we live into the true identity God intended for us and are, therefore, integrated and whole.

Safe Spaces and Community

In addition to a right orientation toward God, we need safe spaces and communities of faith to explore our motivations, stories, and affirm our God-given identity already stamped on our soul. A safe space refers to a relational, communal setting in which a person can be authentic and vulnerable. Safe spaces affirm the image of God in everyone (Crouch, 2009). Communities have the potential to send messages of love and redemption, or messages of shame and rejection (Null, 2016). Therefore, a community's rituals, ethics, relationship dynamics, and language

possess power to form identities (Thompson, 2021). Unfortunately, the sports world seldom communicates that people are loved and belong independent of their performance. In comparison, Christians seek to engage with culture while still fulfilling the call to be ambassadors of transformation (1 John 2:15; 2 Cor 5:20). The problem human beings face is that identities break down when people turn goods into gods and fail to provide safe communities. Christians strive to bring about existential and institutional transformation in the world in order to bridge the chasm of fractured identities through authentic community.

Caring community promotes authenticity and satisfaction (Lin et al., 2016). People need to know that they are accepted before engaging authentically. Palmer (2004) lists several conditions that promote integration, including authenticity and connection to community (p. 33). Integration requires self-exploration and the willingness to listen to what the soul is saying. Though not an easy task, the soul invites us to have the courage to pull the curtain back and listen to what it is saying, in order that we may write a new script of hope and healing. Identifying our current emotional, social, and spiritual location allows us to set a direction to where we want to go. We cannot explore our souls in a vacuum because God has made us for connection and community.

Authentic community requires vulnerability. Vulnerability in community means courageously forging trust with others through willingness to share fears, doubts, questions, dreams, desires, and passions (Habecker, 2018, pp. 139-152). Even the risk of setting very high standards for one another as athletes and individuals is a sign of courage and vulnerability; the willingness to bear another's burden to accomplish a common goal. Authentic community forged through trust and vulnerability means having a space to show one's true self to others without judgement and fear of rejection (Brown, 2006). Some consider vulnerability the most accurate measure of courage (Brown, 2006; Brown, 2012). Integration requires safe communities that invite a person to listen nonjudgmentally to the soul.

Creating Safe Spaces in Sports

Wholeness involves orienting one's identity towards God and participating in safe, authentic community. In the following section we explore what authentic community and the cultivation of safe spaces looks like in sports.

Courageous Leadership

A primary way to create safe spaces in athletic contexts is through leadership modeling of vulnerability. Sometimes, the most salient demonstration of bravery is not dramatic or brawny, rather vulnerability. When coaches model humility and vulnerability, they are reminding their team of their shared fallibility and humanity, leaving all parties more unified in the process (Brown, 2018). Demonstrating competence is of the utmost importance as a leader, but so is demonstrating compassion (Bolsinger, p. 49-60). One way that leaders can cultivate safe spaces with their teams is to take responsibility for decisions and humbly share vulnerabilities when appropriate instead of blame and shame. Shame is divisive and antithetical to vulnerability as shame promotes messages of *never good enough* (Brown, 2006; Kaufman & Raphael, 1996, p. 11). Thus, people often subconsciously disguise their deep shame and fear with anger (Novaco, 1976). Vulnerable leadership sends the message to everyone that people are safe and free to risk and fall. Courageous leadership involves owning one's shortcomings and inviting the community

to be a part of the solution which involves the delegation of authority; encouraging and empowering others to lead, and championing others' successes.

Championing the Person as More than Just a Player

Leaders can create safe spaces in sports by valuing the *person* more than the *player*. Transactional leaders want something from the player and offer praise contingent on performance (Ehrmann, 2011, p. 68-88). It is important to note that a good leader should have high expectations and accountability to one another as well as provide the encouragement and expertise to help the athlete reach goals (Lencioni, 2002). In contrast to a transactional leader, Christlike leaders want something for the player so that the player can grow holistically and realize God's call for one's life. Christlike leadership focuses on building relationships as ends, not as means to something else (Shoop, 2014, pp. 104-105). Leaders will help players flourish by guiding them on a process of realizing who God is, who they are, and what it looks like to grow. Whereas playing time is conditional, dignity and belonging are not. Leaders in sports must champion the athlete as a person more than just a player.

Notions of Success

People in sports will feel safe to explore their stories and true selves when they know holistic health is a part of the definition of success. Expanding our definitions of success to include personal growth promotes integrity and authenticity. If winning games, breaking records, and bringing home trophies are the only ways one is deemed successful, then coaches and athletes will be encouraged to compartmentalize insecurities and struggles. Success should include the method and process (Shoop, 2014, p. 103). Leaders in sports would do well to include growing into one's true self and living into one's vocation as a part of personal and team success, a part of the overall strategy for each player and coach.

Storytelling

We can create safe spaces in sports by inviting leaders and athletes to share their stories in community. Learning to be vulnerable requires safe people and communities who offer space for exploration of the scripts written on our souls and helps to coauthor a new future of authenticity and wholeness (Palmer, 2004). Childhood, sports, and other life experiences have likely written performance-based narratives on the soul (Houltberg et al., 2018; Null, 2016). Communities are healing in that they support and guide the process of reorienting identity towards God. Whether as a team, in small groups, in a local church, or with close friends, people are designed to be connected and to share stories with others. People desire to be known and loved by community and God. To know God more deeply and follow in his ways is to allow ourselves to be seen and known by God and others (1 Cor 13:12). Sharing one's story can be challenging because it is scary, but the vulnerability it requires leads to soulful integrity (Brown, 2006). Storytelling is a key component of creating authentic community and safe spaces.

Leadership in safe communities consistently invites vulnerability and affirms God-given desires and identities. Communities need leaders that intentionally place practices that affirm a God-given identity into their sport liturgies on a daily basis. People desire a place to belong, where each person is seen, heard, and loved as a person (Thompson, 2015). Anderson (2016)

describes the role of a Christian as one of hospitality, welcoming a stranger into our metaphorical home as we welcome guests on a journey from one place to another (p. 36). As such, do our sport liturgies offer such hospitality unconditionally, offering unconditional love, naming each person as a beautiful creation of God in order to rewire the performance-based script and move toward wholeness?

Case Study Part IV

The volleyball player was eventually introduced to the Christian faith in her last years of college. Through consistent coaches committed to developing his players into strong and disciplined women, she learned how to receive God’s love and to pass it on to others. She heard a message from a former All-American football player who closed with a prayer in which he declared, “God, thank you that you will never leave us or fail us. God, thank you that you are more permanent than football.” The volleyball player learned that volleyball would never truly fulfill her. She realized that whereas volleyball was fickle, God would never fail her. She would go on to continue exploring her story, the areas of past hurt, neglect, idolatry, and hiding. She would go on to coach volleyball, but with a new perspective. She realized her vocation and passion of creating safe spaces for others and guiding others towards their own integration and wholeness.

The work of listening to one’s soul and believing in God’s love versus past narratives does not end with a one-time commitment to his call; wholeness is a daily journey of being honest, open, and willing to move into a new future. The world consistently tries to create false identities based on performance—in jobs, in parenting, in relationships, and any arena where the measuring stick is merely outward success instead of inward wholeness.

Conclusion: A Call to Love and Faithfulness

Christians are called to love God with all we have – mind, body, heart, and soul – and to love our neighbors (Mk 12:30-31). To love God with our whole selves points to the call to wholeness and integrity oriented towards God. And we cannot love God with our whole selves if we do not know ourselves (Thompson, 2021, p. 96). To love others as neighbors points to the call to create safe spaces for communities. Authentic leadership in the home and on the field is a way to curate the heart, to be attentive to and intentional about our loves. If we consistently offer “never good enough” messages of shame to those we lead, we are investing in longings that can never be satisfied. If we perpetuate messages that discourage vulnerability, we are growing the chasm between the false self and true self. Neighborly love models and invites authenticity.

Furthermore, neighborly love revolves around God’s faithfulness. God has been, is, and will be faithful to us. Because of God’s faithfulness, we are able to be faithful to ourselves and others. As Rachael Denhollander (2020) told *The Faith and Sports Institute* in an interview,

“If we define success as reaching a particular goal—whether that’s a particular professional achievement, a particular athletic achievement, a particular academic achievement—if our definition of success is defined in reaching that goal, then we have really shifted our perspective from faithfulness to what God has called us to do to a man-made standard and a man-made matrix and network for valuing ourselves. What God has called us to do is be faithful with what we’re given. The results are his.”

When we define our success as faithfulness, we are free from the crushing burden of proving our identity (Houltberg et al., 2018; Null 2016). When we define success as faithfulness, we lean into an identity rooted in Christ. God will be faithful to us; therefore, we can be faithful. Resting in the love of God does not dampen the fire of ambition; rather, God's love fuels our ambition in a different way (Smith, 2019). God's faithfulness means our identity is secure regardless of wins, losses, job promotions, unemployment, broken records, broken bones, and so on. We are called to be faithful to God, faithful to our communities, and faithful to our own wholeness.

Identity is holistic but fractured by idolatry. Idolatry offers a quick fix, promising fulfillment but leading to disintegration and despair. We move from disintegration towards wholeness by orienting our identity back to God's love. Safe spaces in authentic community empower us to be faithful to God's call. It is noteworthy that right before the Greatest Commandment comes the declaration that the "Lord is one" (Mark 12:29). God is calling us to this, to him and to wholeness, so that we love ourselves and neighbor from and toward God's unconditional love.

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