

How Not to Be a Survivor
Philippians 2:1-11
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Do you remember when TV shows were about fictional characters and scripts were written and actors hired to play roles? Do you remember when game shows took place on a sound stage and the contestants answered questions about trivia or grocery costs?

Well, now, a whole genre of television show has taken over called “Reality TV.” Real people are put in different situations – stranded on an island, designing clothes, racing around the world, and cameras follow them as they compete against each other for the prize. The shows are fun – full of drama and cliff hangers. We all know they aren’t REAL – after all in most of our lives cameras don’t follow us around. Most of our days are full of work and laundry and car pooling – not eating bugs, climbing mountains and trying to win \$1 million dollars.

But for those following Christ, these shows aren’t real in another way. A deeper way. They show a kind of reality that stands in opposition to the reality of God. Even though the Apostle Paul didn’t have to contend with reality TV, in much of his writing he described what is real for the person who follows Christ as opposed to what was real for that person before following Christ. Over the next several weeks we are going to look at what is real life for the person following Christ, comparing it to the real life of culture. We’ll use Reality TV – not because it’s real, but because it exaggerates the reality we chose against.

Today we are going to look at the first Reality Series: Survivor. (video)

There is nothing wrong with our survival instinct. It keeps us pushing for life in the midst of disaster and disease. It’s what keeps people alive when they’ve been buried in rubble or

diagnosed with cancer. It pushes us to solve problems and endure pain and discomfort. We are inspired by stories of people who survive disasters. Like Aron Ralston, the climber whose arm was pinned between a boulder and the rock wall of crevice in a remote canyon in Utah. In order to survive he finally decided to cut off his arm. It is the survival instinct that has kept our species alive – the whole flight or fight thing.

Of course Survivor isn't actually about surviving. No one dies. You aren't thrown off a cliff if you get voted off. There are medical personnel standing by to take care of folks who get hurt. The show is about winning. The basic premise is that a group of strangers gets sent to a remote place (except for the camera crew) and have to make a shelter and figure out how to eat. They compete in different competitions. The prizes include immunity in a future elimination vote and coveted items like a good meal or a movie or a visit from family. And then every time the show is on there is a tribal council. And folks vote for the person they want to have leave. At the last show, when it's down to two or three people, a jury made up of those who have been voted off decide the winner.

And so you win by winning challenges and getting immunity, but also by creating alliances with others to vote off certain people who are the biggest threat to you winning. The "best" players create alliances that work in their favor. They lie to each other, manipulate and intimidate each other in order to win. Every relationship is about being self-serving.

Even though the show isn't real life, it's real in that it displays part of what we are like as human beings – at our worst we are willing to do almost anything, not just to survive but to win. And all of life is a competition. It's about winning and losing. Some are winners and some are losers. It's a dog eat dog world, after all. You have to look out for number one. Relationships are about what we get, not what we give.

This is very different from these words from Paul in the letter to one of the early churches at Phillip: *Do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but in humility regard others as better than yourselves. Let each of you look not to your own interests, but to the interests of others.* Paul, though not one of the 12 disciples, is credited with starting the Church. After persecuting Christians, he came to know Christ in a dramatic moment, and then became a leader in the fledgling church. He wrote a lot to early churches, groups of people figuring out how to follow Jesus, and we still have many of his letters. We refer to them as books but they are actually letters. This one, the letter to the church at Philippi, was written when Paul was in prison and was struggling with those who preached about Christ out of envy and rivalry instead of good will.

This text from Philippians is thought to be an ancient hymn – maybe written by Paul or borrowed by Paul for this letter. It reminds us that Jesus changes not just the rules, but the game. It tells the ancient story of Jesus who though equal to God, chose to become like us, took on our human limitations, emptied himself of his divine rights and became a servant of all. He emptied himself of everything but love. He died on a cross for love of us.

The folks in the early church, not unlike today, played a game of “Survivor” of sorts – competing for the place on top in the community. Each wanted to win, so they were driving the church apart. Paul reminded them that for those who follow Christ the aim isn’t about coming out on top, it’s about serving. It’s not about winning, but about losing yourself. Community isn’t just a set of alliances we create to serve our own ends. Community in Christ is about setting aside our own selfish ambitions to think about what is best for all.

There is a way in which folks sometimes think that if they align themselves with Jesus they will win. He is the strongest player and if they follow him nothing bad will happen, they

will be protected from losing their job, going through foreclosure, having problems in their marriage or with a child. Anyone who has followed Jesus for any amount of time knows that's not true. Following Jesus doesn't guarantee an easy life. The only thing it guarantees is a life of service, a life of living for others besides oneself, pouring out one's life for the good of others.

You may have heard this story. It made the rounds on email a year or so ago. A father and his mentally and physically disabled son walked past a park where some boys Shay knew were playing baseball. Shay asked, 'Do you think they'll let me play?' The father knew that most of the boys would not want someone like Shay on their team, but also wanted his son to have that sense of belonging and some confidence to be accepted by others in spite of his handicaps.

The father approached one of the boys on the field and asked if Shay could play. The boy looked around for guidance and said, 'We're losing by six runs and the game is in the eighth inning. I guess he can be on our team and we'll try to put him in to bat in the ninth inning.'

Shay struggled over to the team's bench and, with a broad smile, put on a team shirt.

In the bottom of the eighth inning, Shay's team scored a few runs but was still behind by three. In the top of the ninth inning, Shay put on a glove and played in the right field. Even though no hits came his way, he was obviously ecstatic just to be in the game and on the field. In the bottom of the ninth inning, Shay's team scored again. Now, with two outs and the bases loaded, the potential winning run was on base and Shay was scheduled to be next at bat.

Everyone knew that a hit was all but impossible because Shay didn't even know how to hold the bat properly, much less connect with the ball. However, as Shay stepped up to the plate, the pitcher, recognizing that the other team was putting winning aside for this moment in Shay's life, moved in a few steps to lob the ball in softly so Shay could at least make contact. The first

pitch came and Shay swung clumsily and missed. The pitcher again took a few steps forward to toss the ball softly towards Shay. As the pitch came in, Shay swung at the ball and hit a slow ground ball right back to the pitcher. The game would now be over.

The pitcher picked up the soft grounder and could have easily thrown the ball to the first baseman. Shay would have been out and that would have been the end of the game. Instead, the pitcher threw the ball right over the first baseman's head, out of reach of all team mates. Everyone from the stands and both teams started yelling, 'Shay, run to first! Run to first!'

Never in his life had Shay ever run that far, but he made it to first base. He scampered down the baseline, wide-eyed and startled. Everyone yelled, 'Run to second, run to second!' Catching his breath, Shay awkwardly ran towards second, gleaming and struggling to make it to the base. By the time Shay rounded towards second base, the right fielder had the ball and he now had his first chance to be the hero for his team. He could have thrown the ball to the second-baseman for the tag, but he understood the pitcher's intentions so he, too, intentionally threw the ball high and far over the third-baseman's head.

Shay ran toward third base deliriously as the runners ahead of him circled the bases toward home. All were screaming, 'Shay, Shay, Shay, all the Way Shay.' Shay reached third base because the opposing shortstop ran to help him by turning him in the direction of third base, and shouted, 'Run to third! Shay, run to third!' As Shay rounded third, the boys from both teams, and the spectators, were on their feet screaming, 'Shay, run home! Run home!'

Shay ran to home, stepped on the plate, and was cheered as the hero who hit the grand slam and won the game for his team.

'That day', said the father softly with tears now rolling down his face, 'the boys from both teams helped bring a piece of true love and humanity into this world'.