

In case you *haven't* heard – the World Cup is happening right now. I have to admit I'm not a prolific follower of soccer. The only player names I knew coming into this tournament are the most famous ones – Messi and Ronaldo; and I've been told by my son, Ivyn, that we are *strictly* Ronaldo fans. *NOT* Messi.

But, as happens with large sporting spectacles like the World Cup, I've seen a little bit here and there about different teams and different players. I was *solidly* rooting for Cape Verde, and I thought it was impressive that such an overlooked team came

in and hung tight with two of the most favored teams in the whole tournament over the course of their play. But I was *especially* intrigued by one player in particular – he was a guy I’d never seen or heard of before.

Erling Haaland of Norway.

I kept seeing clips of him on social media and I saw a 6’5” 210 lb Norse God just careening all over soccer pitches and aggressively scoring goals.

Running through tackles, flying through the air to head balls – and looking like he was having the time of his life the whole way. Then I also saw some clips

of him during moments that *weren't* media worthy – like the one where he's the only player on Norway's squad to actually hand his jersey to the equipment manager rather than throw it in his general direction, or the one where he's staying after practice to help the ball boys pick up soccer balls from the practice field, or another where he jumps over the barrier between the soccer pitch and the stands to give his jersey to a little girl who wanted it.

The man is an efficient soccer machine, and he also exudes joy and humility.

*Then* I learned about Norway's philosophy toward youth sports – and about the specific soccer club that Erling Haaland grew up playing with. And it became even clearer.

Norway treats youth sports in exactly the *opposite* way from the US and Canada.

First – they don't keep score. Here in the United States winning and losing become part of the equation early, and this puts pressure on kids to win... and leads to disappointment when they lose. Both contribute to sports related anxiety. In Norway youth sports leagues aren't even *allowed* to keep

score until players are 13 years or older. This keeps kids engaged longer and prioritizes learning, growth, fun, and love of the process of sports.

Second – Norway is *all* about participation trophies! Just say that phrase in certain company here in the United States and you'll get all sorts of reactions. We even make a joke of participation trophies – but in Norway if trophies are awarded at all they're given to all of the kids who participated. This brings kids back for the next season and it encourages them to give the sport another shot. And if we're concerned about the creation of “snow

flakes” Norway holds the record for most winter Olympic medals by a long shot, and their athletes who participate in other seasons show up with energy too.

Third – they prioritize fun. The national philosophy is “love of sport”. How many of us have been at a youth sporting event and heard an adult losing their mind over what’s happening on the field? That doesn’t happen in Norway. To do this Norway makes sports affordable and accessible, along with all I’ve shared so far. As a result the numbers are staggering – in the US only *half* of kids

participate in sports, with the number one reason for their dropping out being that they weren't having fun anymore.

In Norway 93% of kids participate in sports. Because it's fun!

What does *any* of this have to do with Jacob and Esau? Well, I'll tell you.

From the beginning Jacob and Esau are competitive.

The text tells us in verse 22 that the boys pushed against each other inside of Rebekah's

womb. Then in verses 25-26 the text tells us on the day they were born Esau came out first with Jacob “gripping” his heel.

Then the story fast forwards to when Jacob and Esau are grown. The text says in verse 28 that Isaac loves Esau most, but that Rebekah loves Jacob most. Talk about sibling rivalry! So it comes to pass one day that Esau, who is more prone to go hunting and braving the wilderness, comes in to find Jacob boiling stew – and he declares just how hungry he is! Jacob says he’ll feed him if Esau will agree to sell him his birthright.

Now, don't forget, this is the same birthright that was so important coming from Abraham down to Isaac – the one that our text from Genesis says Ishmail was cast out from. The birthright is the promise to be the one through whom the nation of God is established.

Jacob, out of this sense of rivalry, tricks Esau into giving all of that away for a bowl of soup and some bread.

If we fast forward through this story, or if we just look at the whole line of succession from Abraham on down, we see this kind of pattern

emerge. Isaac and Ishmail are at odds, because it seems only one of them can inherit the birthright promise of God. Jacob and Esau are at odds, because it seems only one of them can inherit the birthright promise of God – and this rivalry leads to some serious bad blood between the two, where later on in Genesis we find Jacob gaining the name Israel after wrestling with an angel... on the night before he's to face Esau over this trick of stealing his birthright.

He's certain Esau is going to kill him... but Esau doesn't. They're reconciled and Jacob goes on to

have 12 sons... the youngest of whom is named Joseph... who receives a coat of many colors... whose brothers all feel a sense of rivalry with... who is then sold into slavery to Egypt where he's separated from his family for many years, only to come face to face with them later when famine hits Canaan.

And in the moment when Joseph could stick to this rivalry and cast them away or have them killed – he reconciles with his brothers and his father. And that's how Genesis ends.

It's a pattern of rivalry followed by reconcile – and it's in the reconciling where God is found every time. It's in the moments of humility when the players in the story put down their need to “*win*” and instead embrace the moment for what it is.

The competitive compulsion to “win” in America isn't only relegated to sports. Politicians promise to “win” over their opposite party and, increasingly so, the politicians who can most convincingly show they'll win at any cost are the ones favored by the “base” voters in their respective parties. Corporations and ultra-rich CEOs

are all always trying to outdo one another by how much they can “earn” from the stock market. To see who can have the biggest profit margins. Even churches do it – looking at the churches around us and silently comparing what we have to what the others have. And individually, if we’re honest, each of us probably has a source for this kind of rivalry in our own lives – whether it’s with a family member or sibling, or a neighbor or co-worker.

It’s all because it’s conditioned into us by our environment – as members of a culture that

privileges exceptionalism above almost anything else.

But that's not where God is waiting for us to find God. God is waiting for us to find God in every moment of reconciliation and humility, and every moment where we embrace joy in relationships and what they can teach us.

Erling Haaland and Norway lost to the English team last night in a close match. Going into the match Erling Haaland spoke candidly with humility about where his team was. He said they had a 0.05% chance to win the whole tournament, and so

he was proud of them for even making the quarterfinals. He said the English were the clear favorites in the game, but that he and his teammates would still go out and play as well as they could and live in the moment.

And they did.

In such a hyper competitive culture we could learn a lot from that. We would do *well* to learn from that... because it isn't just a nice story that shows a contrast to the kind of culture we know and understand. It's a testament to the biblical

narrative, and where God most deeply wants to be found. Amen.