

The Road Less Traveled – April 17, 2020

Sunday afternoon I sat down in the family room, picked up the remote and began to channel surf. It's what I do. I can't remember the last time we had anything resembling a TV Guide. I never have any idea what's on. When I do take a moment to sit down, I just take my chances.

On YouTube TV – which we use – all of the sports channels are grouped together. Right now there is not much in the way of sports on, but on Sunday afternoon I found it on ESPN. It was – hold on to your hat – the finals of the Scripps Howard National Spelling Bee from 1997. In case you missed it, 13-year-old Rebecca Sealton of Brooklyn, NY, walked away with top honors, correctly spelling the word “euonym” in the 22nd round.

Don't ask me why I stopped and watched it because I don't know. Part of me thought it was funny that the situation was so bleak that ESPN was showing a 23-year-old spelling bee, but that's not why I watched it. I just got caught up. There were three kids left in the competition when I landed on it, and one was eliminated in short order. The final two battled back and forth for a good half-hour. At some point during that time Melissa walked through the room. And after sort of making fun of me for watching it, she started watching from the kitchen.

At some point I just became invested. I wasn't really all that interested, you see, but I wanted to know who won. It didn't matter that the winner is now her mid-30s, married and a business owner. I just wanted to know who won. But both of the finalists kept spelling the words correctly, and it just drug on.

Finally I figured I had wasted enough time and decided to simply look up the results. That's when I found out that the real reward was in the watching, not the results. Because, you see, when Rebecca Sealton received the word she was required to spell correctly for the win, it was epic. It was clear from the get-go that she knew the word. She asked about the definition, the language of origin – all of the things you are supposed to do in a spelling bee – but it was obvious she knew it. And as she spelled “euonym” for the win, she did so jumping up and down and screaming out each letter. When she finished she continued jumping up and down in the absolute delight that only a 13-year-old champion could exude.

The results would not have told me that. I would have known who won, but I would have missed the moment that made the whole thing worthwhile.

I think we are all guilty of that sometimes. We get so caught up in knowing how things turn out, of making sure we know the results, that we forget about the

journey. We neglect the experience. Sometimes it's no big deal. But sometimes to miss the experience is to miss it all.

I spent 45 minutes watching a 23-year-old spelling bee the other day. I didn't really care that much about it. But the experience I had watching a shy, awkward 13-year-old girl celebrate her success, the culmination of years of hard work, well it made me feel like I knew her. Or at least I wished I knew her. In fact, when it was all over, I looked her up to see what became of her. She seems to be leading a quiet but successful life. And I am happy for her.

In the middle of the strangest Easter Sunday I have yet to experience in ministry, Rebecca Sealfon made me smile. Not because she won. But because the experience of watching her invited me to share in a moment of joy. No line in a history book can do that. Only the journey.