

Olympic Hurdles. Pastor Fritz Wiese. 11 Aug 2024. Lectionary assigned John 6:24-35. And Ephesians 4.25-5.2

Que la paix du Seigneur soit toujours avec vous =
The peace of the Lord be with you always.

Au nom du Père, du Fils et du Saint-Esprit. Amen
In the name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. Amen.

How awesome the Olympics in Paris have been these last 2 weeks. Turn to someone around you and share one event you've enjoyed watching.

- How about when the humpback whale got in on the surfing competition when it started doing jumps right in the photographer's line of sight?
- How about when surfer Gabriel Medina bailed out of his super ride but ended up looking like Jesus on Ascension Day? Iconic photo.
- How about when hurdler Daniel Roberts? Did you see his hometown on the TV screen? Peachtree City! And then with the lean of his chest, he takes silver by 3 one-thousandths of a second! And our own Don Livingston was one of Daniel's coaches when he ran his freshman year for Stars Mill High School; here they are a few months ago at the US qualifiers in my birth-city of Eugene Oregon.
- How about gymnast Brody Malone? 3 time all around US champ from Rockmart, Georgia, a small town where my son Luke and I went skydiving years ago. Brody didn't have his best games, but was incredibly supportive of his team, and helped the Men's Team medal for the first time in years.
- How about the French swimming sensation Leon Marchand who got to hear his home country's deafening shouts of encouragement every time his head popped out of the water while swimming the breast stroke?
- How about Hampton Morris who lifts weights in his garage in Marietta Georgia and put the US on the podium for the first time for any weight class in over 40 years?
- How about Simone Biles conquering the twisties of Tokyo and returning to take the gold in both the individual and team all arounds? I thought it was neat sportsmanship to "give flowers" of affirmation, as Simone put it, to her Brazilian competitor when bested in the floor routine.

On and on we could go with captivating stories!

Well, our gospel today exudes an Olympic-like pace. Just like there is a back-story to any Olympians performance, there is a back-story for today's invitation by Jesus to believe that he is the very bread of life. The day before Jesus feeds 5,000 men plus other family members. What would you say, judges? Gold-medal performance, right? Feeding 5,000. Overnight, Jesus leaves in a boat for Capernaum, a neat town which our Holy Land group got to visit last June. But, in the morning, Scripture tells us that the remaining crowd from the festival feast still wants more engagement with Jesus. Akin to superstars like Simone Biles, Katie Ledecky, or Michael Phelps, people are stoked to interact with this Jesus character whose star is on the rise. Jesus in Galilee is more popular than Snoop Dogg in Paris—a story for another day. 😊

When the crowd hears they can find Jesus on the other side of the lake, verse 24 notes they jump into boats to follow. Did it look like a mini-Olympics? Do they run down to the shore like Noah Lyles in the 100-meter dash? Like hurdlers, do they jump over obstacles to rush to shore? Some, like weightlifters flipping over watercraft? Like bobsledders, pushing the boats into action, and then all jumping and squeezing in together? Like javelin throwers, are they tossing extra oars to each other? For latecomers, do some try to swim it, using the breast stroke, back stroke, or freestyle? Maybe they aren't exactly like the U.S. men's rowing team who, in taking gold, medaled for the first time in this event in 112 years. But they cross the water and find Jesus in Capernaum.

Victory! Successfully finding Jesus, they immediately ask their million dollar question: Verse 28: "What must we do to perform the works of God?" Great question, right? In the spirit of the Olympics, what must we do to earn the medal of life? How do we get on God's podium of recognition and honor?

And then Jesus replies with a hurdle-like answer that many can't get over. A surprise answer launching a theological Greco-Roman wrestling match that still has us spinning around 20 centuries later. A scandalous answer that causes—if you read the chapters that follow--some to complain, others to stop following Jesus altogether, delete him from their FB and Twitter/X accounts, and even others to start working for Jesus' demise. Jesus

answers, ““This is the work of God, that you believe in him whom God has sent.” Verse 29. That you believe. A life orientation Jesus repeats again in our gospel today, in verse 47: ⁴⁷Very truly, I tell you, whoever believes has eternal life. ⁴⁸I am the bread of life.” (Bread is a fun metaphor this week isn’t it, knowing the Paris is known for their fresh baked baguettes and bread)

How massively discombobulating to his faith community—and still many of us today—that Jesus doesn’t say, “You shall know the rules and by them you shall earn God’s favor.” But instead, through me you shall know the truth, and the truth shall set you free.”

If we had the replay, like we get to watch for Olympics events, we’d probably see the confusion on people’s faces. “Believe? Lord, hey we grew up being taught there are 613 rules we can follow to earn God’s approval. We are people of performance. Weren’t you impressed with how hard we worked to get across the lake to hear you some more? And we get extra credit for that effort, right?”

Last week, our fun guest preacher Pastor Bill Diehm launched his sermon with this line: “I come from a long line of hungry people.” Jesus knows that human hunger is never filled in the long run with rule-following, performance, or perfection. So, in our text, Jesus doubles down on his gospel of “less of your worry and works; more belief and trust.” Jesus says: “I am the bread of life.” I want to do more than feed just 5,000. I want to feed you and take care of ALL of you each and every day.

But heaven help us. To “just” believe, or to “just” receive the bread of life is scandalous teaching for our Olympian-like mindsets. We want to earn it, prove it, control it. But Jesus teaches that in the kingdom of God, the good news is a call to, as Paul Tillich said,
Accept that you are accepted.
Love the promise that you are already loved.
Discern that you do not have to earn.
Live each moment whispering “thank you Lord” and not “I hope my performance is enough to earn God’s medal.”

Again, I’ve loved the refreshing two weeks of Olympic activity. One inspiring story, event, and personality after the next in Paris. America’s

athletes were phenomenal. But as I shared in Wednesday's email to you, I still think often of a South African swimmer from 3 years ago.

Tatjana Schoenmaker wore a swim cap with the script, "Soli Deo Gloria," English for "Glory to God alone," a life-view shared by composers like Bach and Handel who would pen this conviction upon all their compositions.

Could it be Olympian Tatjana's worldview illustrate what Jesus drives at today? Again, when the crowd asked Jesus, "what can we DO, what works can we perform to make life worthwhile?", Jesus responds, "Believe in me and my love." So, on her Twitter/X feed, the very first way swimmer Tatjana describes herself is with the phrase, "Child of God" with a red heart emoji, speaking to what? That first and foremost, her life is about delighting in the unconditional love and joy of her heavenly Father.

Tatjana ended up winning gold and setting a world record for the women's 200 meter breast stroke. But I can easily imagine if she hadn't prevailed, if she had been like the majority of these world-class athletes who compete but don't make the podium, she still would have been OK deep down. Because her whole life is "soli deo gloria," a thank you in glory to God for his grace, in all matters—win and lose, ups and down. Over the last few weeks, during offering time, we've heard Larry Peterson play the theme to "Chariots of Fire," the movie depicting Eric Liddell's 1924 gold-medal run. Liddell said he ran not for glory but for "God's pleasure." Yes, winning the Paris Olympic prize was joyous, he said, but his ultimate focus of running well in the Lord's race.

If our gospel helps us understand that Jesus is the Bread of Life, then our first lesson from Ephesians coaches how to share that delicious bread of faith with those around us.

First, Coach Paul warns us about certain behaviors sure to drag us down like racing with cement boots on. Ephesians 4.25-29 outlines the lactic acids lying, anger, holding grudges, hurtful language, and refusing to share. Each entangles us like several of the last two decades' US Men's 4 x 100 relay teams who just can't figure out how to pass the baton well to each other and get disqualified. If you want to pass successfully Jesus' bread of love to other, Coach Paul advises more empowering than Gatorade and Speedo Fastskin swimsuits are: kindness, tenderheartedness, forgiveness (Eph. 4.32).

Actually, do you remember the song by which we can remember those Olympic behaviors everywhere we go? Sing: “Be ye kind, one unto another, tender-hearted, forgiving one another, even as God, for Christ-sake has forgiven you. Do, do, doodley, doo, Ephesians 4.32.

Indeed, the Olympics are inspiring. I love watching the events and the sportsmanship. I’m inspired by hearing that athletes’ stories and their willingness to train, ask hard questions about how they can do things better, to be coached, to want to offer their best performance but usually within the context of a team. And all of that is the story of Jesus followers too, right? To delight that together we make up not Team France or Team USA but Team Jesus, not by our performance or rule-following, but because of his gracious selection of each of us. And then in that joy, feasting on the Bread of Life, we do our best to share that feast with others.

You and I might never get gold or silver medals. And that’s AOK. Heck, we might not end our lives with a lot of literal gold or silver stockpiles either. And that’s AOK too. Because in God’s kingdom, that’s not what it’s about. For we know the real prize is believing. Believing in Jesus and responding in joy.

Believe it or not, there’s actually another camp song about that. A super song for the closing Sunday of the Olympic games. It tells a story from Acts 3 of a poor crippled person reaching out to Peter for financial help. But Peter shares he does not have silver or gold, but he will share what he can—and that’s really what God wants from each of us. And it turns out what the handicap man receives something very special indeed. Here’s the song:

Silver and gold I have none. But such as I have I give thee. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk. (Have them join)

Here’s where if we were around a singing tree, we could all get up and start dancing a bit:

He went walking and leaping and praising God. Walking and leaping and praising God. In the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth rise up and walk!

Friends, you don’t have to go to Paris, but just live your life in South Atlanta to wrestle, run around in circles, tumble, leap, lift the weight, pass the torch

and baton, and dance some too. Let's do it all (start singing) in the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth as we rise up and walk.

In our gold medal name of our Lord, Jesus the Christ, Amen.