

THE OLYMPIC SPIRIT AND THE SPIRIT OF CHRIST

When Jesus saw the crowds, he went up the mountain; and after he sat down, his disciples came to him. ²Then he began to speak, and taught them, saying: ³‘Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ⁴‘Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. ⁵‘Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. ⁶‘Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. ⁷‘Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. ⁸‘Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God. ⁹‘Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called children of God. ¹⁰‘Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness’ sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. ¹¹‘Blessed are you when people revile you and persecute you and utter all kinds of evil against you falsely on my account. ¹²Rejoice and be glad, for your reward is great in heaven, for in the same way they persecuted the prophets who were before you.

(Matthew 5:1-12, NRSV)

A few weeks ago Paul Hamm, Carly Patterson, and Michael Phelps were not household names. Today we know their names, their faces, and their athletic expertise thanks to their gold medal performances at the Olympics. Everybody loves a winner and these winners are easy to love.

But what about those Olympians who will return to their homelands without bronze, silver, or gold hanging around their necks? What about those athletes who knew they did not stand a chance at medalling but went all the way

to Athens anyway just for the chance to compete? These athletes who will never be household names or appear on a box of Wheaties embody the spirit of the Olympic Games just as much as the medal winners, sometimes maybe even more.

Legendary Green Bay Packers football coach, Vince Lombardi said, “Winning isn’t everything; it’s the only thing.” Many in our society agree with Lombardi and go to great lengths to make sure they finish ahead of the competition—athletes who take performance-enhancing drugs, authors who plagiarize, executives who pilfer, students who cheat, and the list goes on.

Whatever happened to, “It doesn’t matter whether you win or lose; it’s how you play the game?” Many today believe, “It doesn’t matter whether you win or lose, until you lose.” Unlike most of us, Jesus loved losers. In fact the crowd was full of losers on that Galilean hillside 2,000 years ago when Jesus spoke the immortal words of the Beatitudes, which begin the most famous sermon in history, the Sermon on the Mount. The crowd was full of losers because by and large an uneducated itinerant rabbi like Jesus didn’t draw the attention of the religious elite, at least not until he became a threat to them.

Jesus drew people whose lives were broken and falling apart, people who were down on their luck, people who had hit bottom, people who felt weighed down by the stress and strain of everyday life. He drew them with his message of hope and grace. He drew them with his message of love and peace. He drew them with his message of acceptance and inclusiveness.

According to Presbyterian minister, Dr. Carlos E. Wilton, the people who came to hear Jesus lived, “in the sort of system that sociologists today would label an

honor/shame society. Elaborate purity laws [separated] the largest portion of that society from the tiny, privileged elite. In first-century Palestine, there [were] so many ways of becoming ritually unclean that only the most industrious practitioners of religion—the Pharisees—[had] any chance of succeeding” (www.pointpresbyterian.org/archives/000008).

Jesus startled this seemingly cursed crowd by telling them that they were “blessed.” He said to them, “Blessed are the spiritually poor...Blessed are those who mourn...Blessed are the humble...Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for justice...Blessed are those with pure hearts...Blessed are the peacemakers...Blessed are the persecuted...Blessed are the outcasts.” In essence Jesus was saying, “Blessed are the losers.” Why? Because Jesus was a loser too.

From his birth Jesus was always a square peg unwilling to fit into the world’s round hole. The absurdity of it all—a king born to a peasant girl in a barn, a teacher with no formal education, a healer with no medical degree, a conqueror riding a timid donkey, a messiah who did not even put up a fight when the soldiers came for him. By the world’s standards Jesus was a loser, but in God’s eyes Jesus was the greatest winner of all time. His life on earth might not have earned him medals or accolades, but his miraculous resurrection overcame humanity’s greatest obstacle, death.

With God’s help we too can learn what it means to lose and to win in the race of life. When we understand who we are and why God put us on this earth, our greatest losses may become our greatest gains. These were some of the truths Jesus sought to communicate to the rag-tag crowd gathered in his midst.

In his modern scripture paraphrase, *The Message*, Eugene Peterson interprets the Beatitudes as follows:

“You’re blessed when you’re at the end of your rope. With less of you there is more of God and [God's] rule. You’re blessed when you feel you’ve lost what is most dear to you. Only then can you be embraced by the One most dear to you. You’re blessed when you’re content with just who you are—no more, no less. That’s the moment you find yourselves proud owners of everything that can’t be bought. You’re blessed when you’ve worked up a good appetite for God. [God's] food and drink are the best meal you’ll ever eat. You’re blessed when you care. At the moment of being ‘care-full,’ you find yourselves cared for. You’re blessed when you get your inside world—your mind and heart—put right. Then you can see God in the outside world. You’re blessed when you can show people how to cooperate instead of compete or fight. That’s when you discover who you really are, and your place in God’s family” (Ibid.).

How is it that we can be most blessed when we feel most forsaken and forgotten? Because difficult times offer us the opportunity to realize anew our utter dependence upon God. Difficult times separate the chaff from the wheat in our lives so that we can see what is really important. And difficult times remind us of that which is merely temporal and that which is truly eternal.

In God’s eyes it is not about winning and losing on this earth, but about living faithfully and courageously. I am friends with a fine athlete named Josh Lawhon. He is 18-years-old. He is an accomplished Olympic swimmer who is a real winner, though he is not a household name. You see Josh is a winner because he is autistic and competes in the Special Olympics. Josh, like other participants, takes the Special Olympics Athlete Oath, which says, “Let me win. But if I cannot win, let me be brave in the attempt” (www.specialolympics.org).

Some years ago the Special Olympics were held in Los Angeles and local sportswriter Jim Murray wrote: “You learn very quickly what is special about the Special Olympics. Nobody was trying to win. There were no false starts, and every athlete performed as if he [or she] alone were on the track. They ran with a kind of beatific joy. There were no tears from losers. In fact, there were no losers...take Angie, who ran in one of the lower divisions of the 300-yard run. I use the word ‘run’ loosely. You can tell right away that Angie is no runner. An obviously glandular case, her torso is heavy with fat, and it took several seconds just to clear the starting blocks. She peered down the track in dismay from behind her [thick glasses]. The field was in the home stretch before Angie [had hardly started]. She lost the race by 200 yards you might say...She stopped several times in some bewilderment at finding herself alone. But from the stands, from her friends, from her fellow competitors who had already finished, came shouts of encouragement. Then Angie would start up again. [And] about 20 yards from the finish line, she collapsed happily in the waiting arms of her friend, with a wild smile of accomplishment. That’s what the Special Olympics are all about. There are stories of times a winning runner knew a companion had fallen, and circled back to help his friend, costing him a gold medal. There was a boy from Chicago who ran on crutches, and a girl who long-jumped on an artificial leg. There was a blind boy who followed the voice of his coach around the track. There was a basketball game without a single intentional foul. There was a boy who finished the race, and then kept running around and around the track because it felt so good” (Ibid. Wilton).

Carlos Wilton says, “According to the Beatitudes of Jesus, those Special Olympics athletes—those whom the world considers the ultimate losers, both in athletic contests and in the genetic lottery—God considers winners” (Ibid.)

Wherever we find ourselves this morning, feeling like winners or losers, in God's eyes we are all winners. With God's help we can overcome life's obstacles and live lives worthy of the One who lost it all and gained even more, our beloved Savior Jesus Christ. AMEN.

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PASTORAL PRAYER

You know us better than we know ourselves, O God. You have given us life and have renewed our spirits. You have carried us to the heights and you have dwelled with us in life's depths. You are hope and our trust. Dwell with us here and now to lift our aspirations and inspire confidence among us. May freedom come to all who are burdened and healing come to all who suffer, through Jesus Christ we pray. AMEN.