

Sermon for Sunday, August 14, 2016

JUST A CLOUD
Hebrews 11:29-12:2

Life is not for the fainthearted and we often find ourselves struggling just to keep going from one day to the next. Luckily, the Olympics, with athletes' stories of overcoming the odds and prevailing in the end, perhaps even winning the gold, are like catnip for our battered souls. And right now, there is probably no story that can rival the one of Simone Biles, whom many have called the best female gymnast who has ever lived.

Born in 1997 to a mother who struggled with drug and alcohol addiction, Simone and her sister, Adria, were raised by her maternal grandfather. After watching other girls doing back flips when she was six years old, Biles began imitating them by doing back flips off her grandfather's mailbox. When she was eight, she caught the attention of a coach who had never trained an elite gymnast before, the same coach who is still with her today in Rio where she is racking up one gold medal after another. But I am sure you already know all of that. And her journey of overcoming adversity, persevering against the odds, and being rewarded with a medal is only one among many.

So, when we hear the Preacher in the book of Hebrews tell his congregation to "run with perseverance the race [of faith] that is set before us," it strikes a familiar chord because that's what life feels like all too often, and we can identify with that. And when he says "we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses," it helps us see that we are not alone in this. We have ancestors in the faith who have run and finished the race, and if they could do it, we can do it as well.

There are only two problems with this picture. First, none of the great champions of faith is being rewarded with a medal. As a matter of fact, in this race there are no medals at all. And second, many of our forefathers and foremothers in the faith did not and could not overcome their considerable odds. Some of them, as the text says, were "tortured, refusing to accept release ... Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword. They went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented, of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground." And, worst of all, for all their effort and steadfastness, they were not rewarded. While they were commended for their faith, "they did not receive what was promised." No medals for them.

Yikes. If this Preacher was intent on promoting the growth of his congregation, of drawing new people into his community of faith, or giving them a pep talk to hang in there during tough times, he surely did not pay attention in *Evangelism 101* in seminary. And pastoral care, I venture, was also not necessarily his strong suit. Should he not have told them that everything was going to be alright? Should he not have told them that numbers aren't really everything, that it was not important for them to be successful since it didn't look like they would be awarded anything in this life?

No, he shouldn't have. And he didn't. The Preacher made it very clear to his congregation, and to us, that a life of faith is *not* a competition. There are no faith Olympics where we get rewarded with gold, silver, or bronze medals in disciplines such as Bible

study, prayer, worship attendance, giving, or mission work. He also tells us why that is. Because, the Preacher says, we cannot get to the Promised Land bolstered by our own efforts. Believing that we can is the oldest heresy in the book. What gets us there are not our own efforts but this: First, what makes our faith “perfect” is that we belong to God’s community of faith of every time and place. The English translation assures us we are “surrounded but so *great* a cloud of witnesses.” It’s not a good translation because the Greek text doesn’t say that. The cloud of witnesses to whom you and I belong is not a great cloud. It’s just a cloud. There is nothing great about being part of this community. We are just part of it. There is no great faith. There’s just ... faith. And second – yes, you guessed it – we are “looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.” He is the one who was and always is faithful, especially in the days when we are not sure whether we are or whether we can be faithful.

In an age of competition, where winning at all cost has become the norm in every area of life – work, school, relationships, the economy, politics, sports, you name it – being told that there is really nothing to “win” when it comes to a life of faith is rather refreshing. Perhaps hearing this is even liberating. We don’t have to work so hard to earn a place on the podium because we are already there. Jesus hoisted us up there. It’s a lofty perch, but it comes at a price, a price Jesus was willing to pay “for the sake of the joy that was set before him” as he “endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.”

I was thinking about this somewhat convoluted last phrase as I was listening to NPR on Friday about the shame, the carnage, and the death and the destruction the children and inhabitants of Aleppo have had to endure for far too long. The reporter spoke of the joy of the children in the midst of the rubble, about their resilience, and their ability to somehow endure and go on. I encountered that same attitude when I read James Baldwin’s landmark essay from 1963, “My Dungeon Shook: Letter to My Nephew on the One Hundredth Anniversary of the Emancipation Proclamation,” in which he talks about racial injustice in America, a country which he loved and for which he would have been ready and willing to lay down his life. For the sake of making my point, I picked these two communities, but there are many others, to be sure. The LGBTQ community, women, people afflicted with mental illness ... the list is long.

Neither of them, neither the children of Aleppo nor the African-American community in our country, nor any of the communities I mentioned only briefly have reached the Promised Land. And we have to recognize that as long as they have not, we have not either. As the Preacher would remind us, we can only get there together. God has provided us with these communities, “so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.” But once we get to the “land of milk and honey” together, any Olympic effort and any Olympic gold medal count, regardless how great, will simply pale in comparison.

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