

Sermon: Look at the Racer, not the Race

Year C, Proper 15

[Isaiah 5:1-7; Psalm 80:1-2, 8-19; Hebrews 11:29-12:2; Luke 12:49-56](#)

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It's the Olympics. That every four year celebration where we imagine what it would be like to stand on that podium and have tears in our eyes. I love the Olympics, even if I am at times cursing NBC for overproducing what could just be broadcast live or when they show me updates from golf or basketball, which I could really care less about.

I belong to two gyms. One is a Planet Fitness, which is a perfectly acceptable, \$10/month, hop on the cardio machine for thirty minutes kind of place. I treat my trips there like a commando raid — get in, get out and make a little human contact as possible. Still it lets me get my heart rate up when it's cold or raining, and it works with my rather erratic schedule.

My other gym is a strength training gym. We go twice a week, and we get a new program every six to eight weeks. It's not a personal trainer, we don't have anyone standing over us saying "give me three more!" thank goodness. But there are never more than 10 people in there and the guy who runs it is simply amazing. When someone new turns up, we're perfectly nice, but we don't really make friends until they get their second program. Because if you come for a second program, you are there for life. We care about each other, know whose vacation to Italy got scheduled because of a volcano in Iceland. We know whose kids are expecting babies and who parents are moving into nursing homes. We help each other with what we know best, so I have gotten great advice on good carpenters and helped families come up with funeral readings and hymns.

If you look around you'd see people shaped like me and little old ladies who have been told that if they don't get moving they'll spend the rest of their lives in a wheelchair. You'd see high school and college athletes doing the kind of hard program that only someone really trained in kinesiology can design. And you see professional athletes, like third stringers from the NFL trying to hold on and a professional boxer. For a couple of years there was a women's competitive body builder and now there's someone trying to make the Patriot's cheerleading squad. And you see Olympic athletes, particularly members of the US judo team.

In the reading from Hebrews, we hear about the podium moments for people of faith. They passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, brought the walls of a city down, survived a genocide, conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fires, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. (Hebrews 11:29-34) What a list! We can definitely imagine the photo ops and TV microphones being pushed in our faces after all of those. Their spouses and parents would be so proud, and we'd get all teary when we heard the national anthem. As people of faith, we know that our belief gives us the ability to take on challenges we could not do without it.

For the last eight years, I've watched members of the US Olympic judo team come and go, as their talents and discipline have waxed and waned. For judo, the Olympics are really the big deal, although it's good to be world champion. By getting to know members of that team, I seen them on the medal stand, and felt so proud of them. But because the US is not a judo powerhouse, I have also heard about all the training camps they have to go to around the world, with weird or inedible food, with really lousy accommodations and exhausting schedules.

Because past a certain point, if you want to be best in the world, you have to go outside the US. And as far as I can tell, the judo powerhouses are not in Rome or Paris. They're in places that have few direct flights from the US. I have learned about the struggle that athletes from small sports face to get any kind of financial support to stay in training. Because small sports are trying to raise their profiles, they often need their premier athletes who are already training as hard as they can to fit in public appearances, which may be more or less well thought through.

That's in the passage from Hebrews too. People of faith were tortured, suffered mocking and flogging, chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, sawn in two, killed by the sword. They wore clothes that weren't even the clothes of poor people, but animal skins patched together. They were poor, persecuted, tormented. They wandered in deserts and mountains, living in caves and holes in the ground. (Hebrews 11:35-38)

I have watched athletes rise through the US rankings to get to the point where they qualify for international competitions. So they head out to places they couldn't have found on the map a week before and they eat weird food and live hand to mouth to keep training. They do all the things that the Olympic athletes do. Some of them make it to London or Rio. But most of them don't. And of the ones that make the team, clearly even fewer of them make the podium.

Now probably the people of faith who had those podium moments of bringing down a wall or shutting the mouths of lions had those moments too, had those moments when they were tortured and mocked and flogged. But their story ended with a medal and an anthem and that's how we remember them. When we look for examples of what faith can do, we tend to pick out the people who move mountains, not the ones so poor that they live in them.

But whether they were climbing the ranks in judo or living lives of faith, the race we have been set is the same. The kids from the dojo, the judo gym, don't get to pick the race that says that whatever genetic gift they have is enough, that the US will suddenly lavish millions on judo, that if they go overseas to train, it is in places like England and Canada where they speak the language and can get a healthy and filling meal at a reasonable price. They don't get to choose their race. They have to run the race they have been set.

So there is no point in focusing on the race. You have to focus on the racer. When they are in my gym, they are doing strength training, so I know nothing about their judo skills. But precisely because their genetic gifts are not enough, they have to have enormous grit and discipline and determination. Whether they are just trying to become the best in their dojo or compete for their second Olympic gold, they have to find it in themselves to show up at the gym when they don't want to. They have to push themselves to do more than is comfortable. They have to treat their injuries with respect in order to recover from them.

And even if they do all that they're supposed to do, practice and get in their strength and cardio training, even if they do all the mental exercises and visualizations, they may not make it either to the Olympics or to the podium. That's just the way the race is. If you focus on the racer, you see how all those challenges are changing them as a person.

In the passage from Luke, Jesus talks about all the chaos that will come with the kingdom. Families will be split apart. There will be wars and conflicts. That's the race we have been set. The question is not whether they will happen, but how they will change us and how we will respond to them. When we know it's going to rain or there's going to be scorching heat, we change what we're going to do. If it's going to be really bad, we often check on our neighbors

and make sure everyone's doing ok. If there is suffering in the world, it's not a sign that we, as people of faith, have missed the podium. That's just the race we've been set. The question is how we're going to allow the race to change us.

Setting aside sin and laying aside the weights that afflict us are not easy. Whatever gifts of faith we were born with won't be enough. And for most of us, no matter how hard we work, we won't have a clear moment where we administer justice or win strength out of weakness. But if we pay attention to how the race is changing us, pay as much attention to that as we do to the weather, we become less hypocritical. We can see how the present time is shaping a path to the Kingdom God is calling all of to.

So yes, run the race you have been set. But remember that the podium is the thing that changes you the least. Even if it is what everyone remembers the most.