

**Sermon: August 14, 2016. Hebrews 11:29-12:2
Ralph Connor Memorial United Church, Canmore AB – Rev. Greg Wooley**

I suspect that my TV set isn't the only one here that has been tuned to the Olympics this past week. This year's numbers aren't in, but in 2012 it was estimated that 3.6 Billion people saw at least some of the summer Olympics on TV, Tablet, laptop or Smartphone. Imagine that! – being in the starting blocks of your race, or on the edge of the diving platform, aware that your next moves were going to be witnessed not only by the thousands of people at the venue but by literally billions of people around the world. Borrowing from the book of Hebrews, that is a "great cloud of witnesses", indeed.

But in addition to the vast numbers of people attesting to your triumphs or heartbreaks, we know that each athlete has a support network that has worked with them for years. So we see athletes from one sport in the stands, cheering for competitors in another sport, which is something that many top athletes rarely get to do because of the demands of their training and competition schedule. We see Penny Oleksiak have all her success in the pool, then we see her mom and dad and siblings up in the stands. There are us faceless casual observers sitting in our easy chairs at home, but then there are the family members, fellow athletes, coaches, trainers, sponsors, childhood friends and training partners whose cheers mean that much more.

And then there's the history of it all. There's the wonderful story of our Canadian flag-bearer and now two-time gold medalist, Rosie MacLennan, and her connection with her late grandpa, Lorne Aldon Patterson, who had been selected to represent Canada in gymnastics in the 1940 Olympics but was unable to because the games were cancelled due to World War II. And Once you are an Olympian you are part of that line that includes Nadia Comaneci and Olga Korbut, Michael Phelps and Mark Spitz, Marnie McBean and Percy Williams. You become part of that lineage of people who can understand in a unique way the peaks and valleys of top-level sports competition, because they have paid the price of preparation, they know the pressure and the self-doubts, the joy of victory, the infamy of unfulfilled expectations, and the invisibility of competing in an less popular sport or being eliminated in a preliminary.

Of course, what we see – whether we're watching a highlight package online, or the full event as it unfolds - is but a blink of an eye compared with the preparation that goes into it. With very few exceptions, these athletes and their families have given tens of thousands of hours to driving, and training, and physio, and local meets and regional events and national playdowns. Many of you in this room are accomplished hikers, climbers, mountain bikers, paddlers, skiers – and you can attest to how much dedication and preparation goes into it if you really plan to push yourself beyond your usual limits. We see the smiling faces on the podium but not the bruises and the breaks, the falls and stumbles along the way. Basketball star Michael Jordan famously put his successes in context by saying, "I've missed more than 9,000 shots in my career. I've lost almost 300 games. 26 times, I've been trusted to take the game-winning shot and missed. I've failed over and over and over again in my life. And that is why I succeed." Years of training, and the courage to risk and fail and try again, are deeply ingrained in the athlete yet invisible to those tuning in to the awards ceremony.

All of this is mirrored in today's reading from the book of Hebrews. Hebrews is a most unusual book, with nobody really claiming to know who wrote it, and it catalogues what professor Amy Peeler calls "everything from the miraculous to the macabre" within the lives of our predecessors in the faith. Much like reading through a list of past medal winners at the Olympics, the 11th chapter of Hebrews gives us a who's who of heroes of the faith, as a means of encouraging the readers in their situations. What is very different from our relationship with the Olympics, however, is that the book of Hebrews is not written for casual observers sitting in their recliners. While we don't know who wrote it we do have a good idea of when and why Hebrews was written, appearing to be addressed to Jewish Christians in and around Jerusalem, perhaps 30 years after the crucifixion of Jesus.

The stories of these great heroes of the faith are not told only for their name recognition. People who were in danger of enduring the sick, twisted tortures of the Roman emperors, particularly Nero, were uplifted by the life stories of Abraham and Sarah who left all security to follow the everlasting God, and Moses, who did not take the easy way out by embracing his status as an adopted son of the Egyptian court, but rather took the risk of returning to his Jewish roots to lead his people to freedom. British Bible Commentator Raymond Brown reminds us that in telling these hero stories of days gone by, the current generation of persecuted Jewish Christians would not only know that they were part of a great and storied

lineage of those whose faith led them to great pain but also great accomplishment; these stories of faithful followers of the past also point toward the God whom they trusted, the God who did not forsake them and whom they did not forsake, the God who acted decisively in Christ Jesus who continuously works to take what we do and make it holy.

The author of Hebrews needs people under pressure to know that their faithfulness matters and that it is supported, by a faith tradition that reaches back for centuries, by the ongoing activity of Christ Jesus, AND by their fellow believers right now, who are finding inspiration from their faithfulness and who are actively praying for their safety. While largely conceived as a community of those who have already died and are cheering them on from the realm of heaven, the “great cloud of witnesses” includes all those in the present day who are willing to make costly choices to visibly and audibly throw their support behind those who endure persecution because of their fidelity to God’s way of radical love.

When we look at the list of past Olympians, and this list of faithful forebears in the book of Hebrews, it’s important that we remember that these are lists of human beings, not cartoon characters or caricatures. Just because someone stood on a podium doesn’t mean they’ve always been a fair and generous competitor and it certainly doesn’t guarantee that they’re a nice human being. And just because they succeeded in the end doesn’t mean they didn’t need persistence to get there. One of the things I most respect about the Bible, is that it goes to great lengths to let us know the human flaws and foibles of people like David, the great King and noted adulterer, or Samuel, whom Raymond Brown describes as “a great prophet but not much of a parent”. No less authority than John Calvin himself commented on this listing from Hebrews 11, saying “in every saint there is always to be found something reprehensible... there is no reason, therefore, why the fault from which we labour should break us or discourage us, providing we go on by faith in the race of our calling.” (Brown, p.91) If we can allow our heroes to be fully human – our athletic heroes and our religious, political and personal heroes – it allows us to embrace our own humanity, our capacity to do good even amidst our propensity to make lousy choices, and our ongoing need to keep on trying in the midst of those slips. We allow the great cloud of witnesses even more ability to cheer us on when we realize that they are or were tempted, flawed human beings who, by faith, trusted in the living God enough that they were able to persevere, and do something brave and great.

We have, then, these two parallel stories: the unfolding Olympic journey, and the procession of the faithful-but-not-perfect as presented by the author of Hebrews. In addition to these, there is a third parallel strand: our personal “great cloud of witnesses” who inspired, supported and, in many cases, preceded our journey of faith.

The development of faith doesn’t happen in isolation. Each of us can point to countless individuals who have contributed to our desire to follow in the path of Christ Jesus. The list likely includes parents, grandparents, aunts or uncles, Christian friends, school teachers, Sunday School teachers and clergy whose wisdom and knowledge have touched our hearts and minds and inspired us to faith. It will also include people whose actions have spoken louder than words, people who may not have said a word about belief but whose kindness, courage and innovation have shown you more about God than any doctrine ever could. Whether those people are still actively involved in your life or have passed into God’s holy presence, each one of us has a group of people we are indebted to in helping to form our Christian commitment. And this year, as we celebrate the 125th anniversary of this congregation we acknowledge those who have sat in these pews and spoken from this pulpit, those who served by stoking the fire in the old pot-belly stove that used to sit in this room, and teaching Sunday School in the old hall that used to sit just south of the sanctuary. For our faith is not just something we hold personally, but is part of who we are as a people, people whose words and actions are challenged and expanded by the great cloud of witnesses that surrounds and supports us.

As I think back in my own personal story it takes no time at all to think of half a dozen people whose contributions to my faith have been game-changers, and as I have come to learn more about those who have preceded me in Ministry at Ralph Connor, and the hearty folk who kept thing congregation alive through some very lean years, I am filled with gratitude. What I may be less able to hear in the midst of that, is God’s call to me and to us to function as a “great cloud of witnesses” to others who need our support right now.

Although last week's reading from Matthew warns Christians about making a big show of their prayers or their good deeds, there is significant value – especially in these secular times – when a Church says or does something publicly. So while it's a little thing, I hope that the rainbow flag in the sanctuary and on our signboard out front will be the first of many ways that we say “we are open to the LGBTQ community, to offer you our loving support and to be changed and challenged by you.” I have been told by other Church leaders how much it means to them to have this congregation at the centre of the efforts to bring Syrian refugees to the Bow Valley. Much of the community leadership regarding the walk of reconciliation with our aboriginal sisters and brothers is coming from within this congregation. And while there's a long road ahead, the desire to employ someone to learn about the youth and young adults out there in the community, and start building bridges with them, speaks of a faith that transcends mere words.

In her forward-looking book, *The Practicing Congregation*, Diana Butler Bass pushes this congregation and every congregation to embrace a life infused with Christian Practice, to commit ourselves to practices of prayer and to understand much of what we do as prayer turned to action. She writes (p.66), “When Christians understand that what they do comprises a way of life that is corporate, ancient, and wise, the theological imagination opens wide. Prayer is more than an isolated personal exercise. [In addition to] contemplation, study and discernment [prayer also includes] healing, doing justice, and friendship. Making coffee for the welcome hour is more than a task; it is a constituent part of hospitality, a small action that allows for the practice of welcoming the stranger.... Worship...expresses in liturgical form all the practices a community cherishes – singing, intercession, connection with God, contemplation, study, formation in faith, and hospitality. [taken together, these] practices of faith can point the way to God and love.” These words by Diana Butler Bass remind us that while our connection with Christ is deeply personal he rarely did things alone. We, together, are called to be the great cloud of witnesses that trains and supports and cheers on folks out there who struggle to find peace and joy in life, and we are called to be the body of Christ to one another as we stumble and stagger and occasionally make the podium as we run the race of life.

And so on this day – as we gather to sing, to pray, to share in a meal of reconciling love – we give thanks. We give thanks for famous people, including those who just became famous this week, whose stories and accomplishments inspire us. We give thanks for those who worshipped in this room 30 years ago, and 90 years ago, and 125 years ago, and for those whose input has helped shape us into the people we are today. We give thanks for a God whose commitment to peace in every nation and every household is unshakeable. We give thanks for our Lord Jesus Christ, whose words set an agenda of boundless inclusion and whose life, death and resurrection put that agenda into action. We give thanks for the Holy Spirit, who suggests to us that we can be the great cloud of witnesses to those near and far who need the encouragement that God can express through us. And we express, in word and deed, our commitment to run with perseverance the race set before us. Amen.

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