

Heroes of the Faith

How many of you watched the Olympics this past Thursday night? Madeline, Anna and I watched as an American swimmer named Simone Manuel became the first African-American woman to medal in an individual swimming event. In fact, she didn't just medal; she won the gold medal. When asked after the race what it meant to her, she said, "It means a lot. This medal is not just for me. It's for a whole bunch of people who came before me, and have been an inspiration to me. And it's for all the people after me who believe they can't do it, and I just want to be an inspiration to others that you can do it." Isn't that remarkable? I've added her to my list of personal heroes! And that's what I love about the Olympics: they show ordinary people doing extraordinary things. And yet even at that level of excellence, sometimes you win, and sometimes you lose. But when push comes to shove, what matters most to these amazing people is simply doing their best, win OR lose. I'd call that a great metaphor of life. And, a great illustration for today's sermon.

As I pondered today's text from the book of Hebrews, I found myself thinking a lot about my own "great cloud of witnesses," my own heroes, to whom I'd like to dedicate my life accomplishments, just as Simone Manuel dedicated hers. My mind went immediately to my mom and my dad. By faith my mom began serving with MCC, at an age when many wondered whether she would ever get married. By faith my dad, about an hour before the train left for Chicago, decided to forego a doctoral program in Sociology and entered seminary instead. By faith they met each other, fell in love, and decided to get married, even though she was twelve years older than he. By faith they had me, after two miscarriages. Given her age, I was a high-risk pregnancy. By faith . . . well, I could go on and on about their choices and accomplishments, their successes and failures, strengths and weaknesses, their faith, fears, and insecurities. Dad accepted a call to serve as pastor of the First Mennonite Church in Chicago, despite a truncated education and him feeling woefully unprepared. Several years later mom joined him as new faculty members at the seminary in Elkhart, becoming the first woman to teach there. And both of them, in the closing years and months, days and weeks of their life, shared with me their fears and doubts. Even after 94 years, Mom wasn't sure she was truly forgiven by Jesus (I assured her that she was). After her death Dad doubted the existence of heaven, particularly as a place where he would see Mom again. All he knew for certain is that she was gone. Now he is gone too, for three years already. And yet, they're not gone. I can feel them up there, in my great cloud of witnesses, cheering me on in this Olympian race called life. I keep this picture on my desk in the church. This side is Mom and Dad, sitting on the couch in our living room. And this is my mom, wearing a homemade hat and eating cake at my 50th birthday party. [Place on communion table.]

Who is part of your great cloud of witnesses? Who are your heroes of the faith? Whose pictures would you like to add on the communion table?

According to this passage, our list of heroes in the great cloud goes way, way back. Abraham, Moses, (Their stories were told in the preceding verses of Hebrews 11.) Rahab the prostitute; Samson, the vain muscle-man and sucker for women; David, despite his checkered

career as King; the prophets—all these people are part of our common cloud of witnesses. Can you feel them? First paving our way, then cheering us on? They're joined by our Anabaptist foremothers and forefathers, some of whom gave up their life for their faith, often suffering horrible deaths. [Reading from the Bible.] *"Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect."* I find that a remarkable statement. Every one of us here today is part of this long line of flawed heroes of the faith, this cloud of witnesses, who cheer us on as now we take our turn running this race. Gideon. Samuel. Ruth. Esther. [Name in addition two men and two women in the congregation.]

According to the writer, one hero, one witness stands head and shoulders above the others in our cloud. I'm talking about Jesus of Nazareth, Jesus the crucified one, Jesus the Christ. The writer calls Jesus the pioneer of our faith. What a great image! There is nowhere we can go that Jesus has not first gone before us, paving the way, blazing the trail. There is no pain that Jesus has not experienced, no depression, no hardship, no doubt, no suffering that Jesus has not also suffered. And now he's cheering us on—can you hear him? Go [name]! Go [name]! You can do this!

According to the writer, Jesus is not just the pioneer, but the perfecter of our faith. And I didn't think there was anything such as perfection in life! Even in the Olympics, there are no perfect scores these days. But Jesus showed us where perfection is to be found, how it can be attained. As it turned out, it could only be attained by enduring the cross, disregarding its shame.

I doubt we fully understand how shameful his death on a cross was. The cross marked Jesus as the Big Loser (capital B, capital L), the one who failed to win his race, who failed to advance to the final, who failed even to make the team. He was stripped naked, nailed to a piece of wood, and displayed for all to see, to jeer at, to turn away from in disgust, to change the channel, to turn off the TV. And many did.

But then, he was resurrected. It was the gold medal that no one saw coming, that caught everyone by surprise. His failure turned out to be a success, his spectacular loss a huge win. Death was defeated. Humility was rewarded. Weakness the key to strength. Self-giving love the astonishing training program that virtually guarantees one a place on the only medal stand that really matters.

Jesus is our trainer, and he is up there—let's make that, down here—cheering us on as we run this race called life. Cheering with him are all of our other heroes of the faith, those we have in common and those that are uniquely yours.

To whom shall we dedicate our effort? To all the ones who have run before us? Sure! They showed us how. To all the ones who will run after us? Of course. Maybe we'll even be an inspiration to them, proving that they too can do it, despite their doubts.

One day, with Jesus as our coach, our trainer, our guide, we will all be heroes of the faith. We too will join the great cloud of witnesses to God's grace and love. For now, as the writer urges us, let us also lay aside every sin that clings so closely, every temptation that trips us up, every unnecessary weight that slows us down, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us. Runners take your mark; go!

Amen.