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Date: August 5, 2012

Sermon Title: Olympic Reflections 2012

Scripture: 2 Timothy 4

Pastor: Rev. Alida Ward

So, as you heard me tell the kids, yes, I have been spending inordinate amounts of time watching the Olympics. I know that these are the Olympic Games we had hoped would be in New York – but I have to tell you, I am loving the whole London thing. I lived in England for a while in my youth, and ever since have fancied myself as something close to a native, all because I know what lorries, knickers and wellies are. So I watch these games nodding knowingly as they flash up scenes around London, even though, truth be told, if you dropped *me* by parachute into the middle of London like they did with the Queen, I wouldn't have a clue where I was or what to do. And by the way, can I just say – parachuting the Queen in for the opening ceremonies was one of the funniest and strangest things I've seen, which made it absolutely perfect for the land which produced Monty Python. The Queen was actually overheard the next day saying to the Mayor of London, "I do hope it gave people a laugh." Oh yes, it did.

So yes, avid watcher I have been. All the hours that another preacher might have spent immersed in biblical studies preparing for this morning's sermon, I have spent gazing in awe as Gabby Douglas, The Flying Squirrel, soared through the air, and 15 year old Katie Ledecky motored through the water for their respective golds – I've watched soccer and tennis and volleyball which bears NO resemblance to the game I played in high school gym class. And I've even watched a little *beach* volleyball, but probably not as much, I'm guessing, as some guys in this room.

And as is always true in an Olympics year, there are stories that just grab at you. What is not to love, for instance, about Gabby Douglas? She flies through the air with the greatest of ease, and she does it with that huge smile on her face the whole time – she simply exudes joy. And she's just a kid. "I love when I'm flying up in the air," she said, "and I can hear the crowd going 'oh nooo!', and I think "people, chill, I'm going to catch that bar!" And of course, she does. After the win, a reporter said, "you know, you're the first African

American to do this,” and she said, “Oh, yeah, I didn’t think about that!” That I loved.

Yesterday, by pure chance – I hadn’t checked the schedule – I turned on the TV right as runner Oscar Pistorius settled into the blocks for the 400 meter race. And by settled into the blocks, I mean that he placed his two prosthetic legs into the blocks and got ready to do what no one has done before – run an Olympic race as a double amputee. And what was so cool – while every other runner stared down the track with appropriately dead-serious expressions, Oscar Pistorius just grinned. Braced in the starting blocks, hands on the track, eyes on the prize and grinning. “It’s been a long, long journey to this place,” he said later – “I was just so happy to be here.” The noise from the crowd was deafening, the cheers thunderous, as he courageously, improbably, flew down the track to qualify for today’s final. *That* was a joy to watch.

But it’s not just the big names. I caught a story the other day about the Somalian Olympic team. All two of them. A young man named Mohammed, and a girl named Zamzam, who are there to run. They train in the ruins of a stadium in Mogadishu; they dodge soldiers and violence as they run through the streets of the city. As much courage and tenacity as it takes *any* athlete to train, the bravery of these two blew me away, as well as their pride and genuine sweetness. “I am hoping to win the golden medal,” Zamzam told one interviewer, and on the streets of London they have been embraced, quite literally, by other Africans who know their story and know what they have escaped – however briefly. Whatever time they run in their races these next few days, the real race is the one they’ve run to now.

And that is what brings me – finally, now – to scripture. To the scripture that Emory read for you just a few minutes ago. It’s a passage from the second letter to Timothy, and the voice you hear is the voice of the Apostle Paul speaking, near the end of his life, in a letter he writes to a much younger follower of Christ. Historians argue over whether Paul really really wrote this letter, or whether it’s what someone who knew him well imagine he might have written – but that doesn’t much matter. What we have are the words of an older, wiser, deeply faithful disciple of Christ sharing with a young whippersnapper Christian what it means to be willing to walk with Christ, what it means to live a life of Christlikeness. And what he says is this: Do this: proclaim the good news; be persistent in good times and bad; convince people, encourage people., There’s a time coming when people will turn away from listening to the truth and wander away to myths. So for you, do the work of an evangelist, tell the story, carry out your ministry fully. As for me, I have fought the good fight, I have finished the race, I have kept the faith.”

When we say keep the faith, that’s where our expression comes from – that’s what this guy was saying to his young friend: Keep the faith, like I have. Fight the good fight. And finish the race. Run it strong, and finish the race.

It's a good passage for Olympic week. There's a lot we're watching that brings this passage to life, the good fight, the faith kept, the race finished strong – we are watching it over and over.

The speculation is that Paul was probably a pretty good athlete in his time. Just to be quite clear, in case I haven't *made* it clear, I was *not* a pretty good athlete in my time. I was no kind of athlete at all. You have two pastors ... one is the ex-jock who peppers his sermons with sporting references, and the other – moi – is an ex president of the high school French Club.

So when I talk about the power of this metaphor – running a race, finishing strong – I do this not from the viewpoint of an insider. I come at it as someone whose most impressive lifetime athletic achievement was coming in two thousand and fifty-third in the Thanksgiving Day run down in Southport some years ago. The results – horrifyingly – are still posted on the Internet for any of you who wish to peruse.

But that's okay. I still get it. I still understand what Paul meant when he said the life of faith, following Christ, is something like running a race.

I know, you know, what he meant. That to live as a person of faith means that day in, day out, that's what you're focused on, just an athlete keeps focused. It means that you wake up every day saying '*today I'm going to walk as closely with Christ as I possibly can, I am going to follow his way as best I can, and when I fail, I am going to pick myself up and try it again.*'

In the same way that an Oscar Pretorius says 'there is nothing more important to me than getting this body of mine onto an Olympic track,' in that same spirit of commitment, a follower of Christ says 'there is nothing more important to me than getting this life of mine on God's track.' In the same way that ZamZam from Somalia says "I want to win that medal that is golden," a person of faith says "I want my life to be golden, I want love to shine through everything I do, I want people to see God's Spirit in me."

And in the same way that a Gabby Douglas exudes joy, the sheer joy of being alive, each one of us is created to find delight in this world, and to seek joy for others.

Which comes back, then, to staying focused. If, at any point, we find ourselves doing anything less than what is best, anything less than what is loving and what is just, what is compassionate and what is true, well then, we've lost focus. we've not kept the faith.

But if we love with the welcoming, inclusive, wide-open embrace of Christ himself, if we care for the least and the lost, and work for the kingdom of God, then we have kept the faith, fought the good fight, run the race that is set before us, for the medal is golden.

Maybe there's actually a better sports metaphor than the Olympics. Maybe I don't have to look across the sea to London at all – maybe all I have to do is point you to the roads beyond these walls, where last weekend I swear half this

church hopped on a bicycle to do the Connecticut Challenge, the bike ride that raises money for cancer research and care for survivors.

Fred Zarrilli, who rode, wrote to us in an email afterwards that his ride was exhilarating, a joy – and he talked about the “*soaring spirit and goodness of the event.*” It was our Jeff Keith, I think you know, who created the Challenge. Last Sunday at our early service his mom Donna Bossa told his whole story to us. Some of us knew some of it already, some among us were hearing it for the first time. She told the story of Jeff’s childhood cancer that took one of his legs, and of his absolute refusal to let that stop him in any way. She told the story of his run across America in 1985 to raise awareness of cancer’s toll on children, a run that took eight months, and landed him in People magazine – I remember it – and a visit to the Reagan White House. And she talked about what we know him for now -- his extraordinary work having created the Connecticut Challenge and the Swim Across the Sound, the work he shares alongside Karin and all his wonderful family here. So, really, how could an event born in such commitment, such faith and compassion *not* be a place where someone like Fred feels a *soaring spirit and great goodness*. What happened here last weekend just might have as much to teach us as what we’ve watched each night on NBC.

And what it all teaches us is what that old faithful Christ-follower was trying to tell his young friend. Keep the faith, he wrote. Proclaim the good news with your whole life, in good times and bad; convince other people, encourage people. Do the work of an evangelist, he said – which means, very simply – do the work of someone who has good news to tell and love to share and a kingdom to build. Tell the story. And run the race strong, for all that is good, all that is joyful, all that is golden. Amen.