

Olympic Thoughts

August 14 2016

Galatians 3:24-27

I'm going to tell you the story of Yusra Mardini.

You may already know it;

in this past week many of us have come to know Yusra's story.

Yusra grew up in a suburb of Damascus, Syria,

and from the age of three, what she loved to do was swim.

So swim she did,

and she was good--- really good.

She had an awesome coach, as it happened -- her own dad.

With his help, she made the Syrian national team by the time she was 13.

But that was 2011, and 2011 was when civil war broke out, and life was disrupted forever.

School was canceled, practices were canceled,

there was shooting in the streets;

a joyful childhood had become a living nightmare.

In 2012 government forces came to her town,

and in the worst massacre of the war, hundreds were lost, including friends and teammates.

Her family home was destroyed.

It was time, her mother told Yusra, for her to leave.

She was 14.

With prayers, with tears, her parents sent her and her sister away, in the company of other relatives.

They made their way to Beirut, and from there to Istanbul,

and there they found smugglers to put them in a boat to Greece.

It was a dinghy meant to hold six people;

there were twenty of them in it, including a little six-year-old boy.

And in the Aegean Sea, the motor stopped, and the dinghy took on water,
and Yusra, the swimmer, knew it was time for her to swim like never before.

With her sister, she jumped into the water,
and they pushed the boat through the water.

Three and a half hours in the ocean, swimming for their lives and to keep the others alive.

And said Yusra, trying to stay cheerful the whole time for that little boy.

"I kept making funny faces for him," she said,

"he was so scared; I wanted him to know he would not die."

They made it to Greece, they made it in the end to Berlin.

Yusra's swimming had saved them.

Last weekend,

Yusra swam again -- in the Olympics.

You probably saw it.

She swam the 100-meter butterfly, as one of the members
of the members of the first ever Refugee team.

Her team, all 10 of them, had walked into the opening ceremonies
under the flag of no country, only the Olympic flag.

Yusra wasn't in Rio to medal, that didn't matter.

Mostly, she said, she hoped to meet Michael Phelps.

And she *didn't* win the butterfly, but she won her heat, touching the
side of the pool before everyone else in the pool,
as surely as she had already touched our hearts.

In every Olympic year, there are moments that captivate us,
that remain indelible in our minds --

there are people whose stories enter into our memories forever.

Yusra Mardini will be carried in memory far beyond these games.

And I imagine for each of us here,

there are Olympic memories etched into our minds,
a moment we can bring to mind with ease,
a particular athlete whose strength and determination awed us.

My earliest Olympic memory -- again dating myself as I seem to keep
doing in my sermons --

my Olympic memory was Nadia Comaneci,
the Romanian gymnast of the 1976 games.

I watched her on a black and white TV with a coat hanger for an
antenna --

we were visiting relatives who weren't much for television,
and their only TV was in the basement, a 13" set no one used.

I sat by myself cross-legged on the floor for hours,
and watched, open-mouthed, as this girl my age flew through the air
with such confidence and grace.

She scored perfect 10 after perfect 10,
which the Olympic scoreboards weren't set up to handle;
"1.0" is what it said over and over again.

Nadia Comaneci.

And in 2008 -- do you remember the man who was the flagbearer for
the American team?

Lopez Lomong.

Lopez was one of the lost boys of Sudan.

He'd been kidnapped from his home by the rebel army seeking to turn
children into soldiers.

In the middle of the night, he'd squeezed through a hole in the fence,
and run three days in the desert, run to the Kenyan border.

He never really stopped running.

Lopez went from doing laps around his refugee camp in Kenya
to laps around the Olympic track for this country,
for this country which took him in.

There was one past Olympian, though, who so inspired me that I preached a whole sermon on him, back in 2000.

And this one you likely don't remember.

He was a swimmer from Equatorial Guinea named Eric Moussambani. He had trained for the Olympics by swimming in the ocean near his home.

He had never actually seen an Olympic sized pool before he got to the Olympics,

and he had never raced 100 meters, the event in which he was entered.

And when it came time for his heat,

the two other competitors with him both false-started and were disqualified,

leaving Eric Moussambani to swim all the way up the 50 meter pool, and back, by himself.

It took him also two full minutes -- in an event that champions do in less than 50 seconds.

But those two minutes of his were marked by dogged determination, sheer tenacity, a lot of arm-flailing and splashing,

and a crowd which slowly rose to its feet as they realized that the swimmer they were watching

was giving every ounce of his strength and spirit simply to finish the race.

The thunderous ovation as he climbed out of the pool was no less than a Phelps would receive.

What is it about the Olympics, about Olympians, that so captivates people, that has always so captivated me?

What is it about those moments that they remain so etched in our minds?

It's not just the champions;
it's the athletes beyond the limelight, too,
the ones who won't ever set the records,
but whose heart and grit and courage are
extraordinary, powerful, moving.

And I guess that's what moves all of us:
the sight of so many people, brothers and sisters in this human race,
whose courage and commitment are there, poured out, for us to see,
poured out on the track,
in the pool, on the balance beam,
on the court.

But I think it's such more than that, and the *more than* is why this is a
sermon this morning,
and not just a collection of Olympic stories.

The *more than* is this:

In the Olympics, at their best, we catch a glimpse,
however fleeting a glimpse,
of what this world was designed by God to be.

What this world is actually meant to be.

And that is a place where all are welcome,
where everyone is cared for and respected,
where each person is given the freedom to excel at the gifts within
them,
where color doesn't matter, nation has no bearing, religion isn't a
barrier,
where all are one.

At their best, the Olympics truly are this.

At their best, they are something like what Paul was talking about to
his friends in Galatia in that passage Leonard read to you:

In Christ, he wrote, there is no male nor female,
there is no slave or free, there is no Jew or Gentile,
all are one.

The first hymn we sang today was based upon that scripture:
in Christ there is no east or west, no south, no north,
but one great fellowship of love throughout the whole wide earth.
The Olympics at their finest offer us a taste of that,
a golden glimmer through the clouds of a world like that.

These Olympics of 2016 take place amidst the clouds indeed --
amidst storm clouds.

That there is a refugee team this year is testimony
to the hundreds of thousands driven from their own countries by war.
These Olympics take place in a world where hatreds seethe
and find their expression in terror.

And in fact our music today, the beautiful music which Sandra chose
for this morning's worship,
is poignantly dedicated to the people of France;
to those grieving in Nice,
to those still carrying the sorrows of Paris's wounds.
These Olympics take place in world where there is great hurt.

That is the world **we** see.

But the world God sees, the world as God dreams it,
is the world we catch a glimpse of in the Olympics.

It's what Jesus called the kingdom of God.

And that world was what *Christ* first came to give us a glimpse of:
in the love he spoke and the healing he lived
he *showed* us this kingdom on earth:

he painted a picture of a world where all were included, and none left
behind,

where people do justice, love mercy, and walk humbly with God.

Our task, Jesus said to us, and still says to us,
our task as disciples is to get our world to that place.
That's a finish line that's pretty tough to reach.
But it is our race to run,
it is the race we've been given to run.

And to do it, we need all the gifts of commitment and tenacity
that we so admire in our Olympic athletes.
To build a world of peace, we need the courage of a Yusra Mardini,
the grit of a Lopez Lomong.
To go on with hope, we need the perseverance of an Eric
Moussambani,
the unfailing strength to push ourselves forward,
to believe in what can be in the face of what **is**.

I'm certainly not the first to say that being Christ's follower is
something like being an athlete pushing toward a finish line --
the apostle Paul said that, **too**,
said that we are called to run the race that has been set before us,
with our eyes on the prize that Christ holds out before us:
with our eyes on a world turned toward love.

Yusra Mardini,
that Syrian girl whose swimming saved lives,
will stay with me -- her story will stay with me.

But there are two other women who have lifted our spirits,
who have lifted *all* our spirits -
and I'll close with them.
And those are the two Simones.
On Thursday evening, Simone Manuel,

who was not the favorite, rocketed through the water for a gold medal in the 100 freestyle: the first African-American woman to win a swimming gold.

And standing on the pool deck afterwards,
tears streaming down her cheeks,
the first words out of Simone Manuel's mouth were these:
"To God be the glory."

Moments later, Simone Biles flew through the air,
strong and sure,
and landed as a gold medalist.

And to the reporter who was striving to find the right metaphor for her achievement,

Simone said, "I'm not the next Usain Bolt or the next Michael Phelps -- I'm the first Simone Biles."

I am, in other words, a child of God,
God's own creation, myself.

Two young women, strong and sure, held back by no one.
As it should be, as the world should be.

But it was what I saw on the medal stand after the gymnastics,
that really took my breath away ...
that reminded me that what we were witnessing,
however briefly,
was what the world was designed by God to be.

Because that medal stand stood three women:

Simone Biles, an African-American woman who is a faithful Christian;
Aly Raisman, a American woman whose family is Jewish;
and Aliya Mustafina, a Russian -- and a Muslim.

And as the three of them embraced, there it was for us all to see:

the world we long for, the world we dream of,
the world as God meant it to be.

In Christ there is no east or west, we sang.
In Christ we are all one, wrote Paul.

What we dare to dream, we are called to seek;
what we dare to hope, we are called to believe;
the kingdom we glimpse, however fleetingly, we are called to build.

May we do it, with Olympic determination and unending faith. *Amen.*