

August 21, 2016



## "Seeing Beyond Winning and Losing"

Sermon by Rev. Robert English

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

*By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.*

*And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets— who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented— of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground. 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.*

*Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.*

Winners. We love winners, do we not? Our world loves a winner. This has seemed a little bit heightened these last two weeks because of the Olympic Games which wrap up tonight with the closing ceremony, just in time for Football season.

The Olympic Games tend to be one of those things which brings out the best in humanity. When you are watching the games there are these moments when you do feel as though you are a global citizen, you get that feeling that we are all in this together. You feel as though you are part of something far larger than you alone. There are poignant moments of compassion like in 5000 meter race when American Abbey D'agostino and New Zealander Nikki Hamblin both took hard falls during a preliminary race. After the fall Abbey checked in on Hamblin and they helped one another up to finish the race, even though they finished way behind the rest of the pack. A Los Angeles Times article quotes Hamblin saying, "I'm so grateful for Abbey for doing that for me. That girl is the Olympic spirit right there. Regardless of the race and the result on the board, that's a moment that you're never, ever going to forget for the rest of your life."

The article then went on to conclude "No matter what happens in the final, they're big winners here." We love winners so much even when someone is technically a loser we still find some way to make them a winner. The Olympics brings out these moments, these larger-self moments within us, as it reminds us that being human is a beautiful gift. The Olympics reminds us that our diversity is meant to inspire us and transform us into more inclusive, more compassionate beings. The Olympics gives us a moment to pause and celebrate the dedication and hard work of all the athletes in all the different sports and all the ways we use our bodies we are given to magnify and glorify our God. But there is another side to the Olympics.... the Medal Count.

Last week I was talking with a friend about the games. Over the course of our conversation we both, somewhat quietly, confessed to one another that more often than not, our first impulse, when we think of the Olympics, is to get online and to see the country medal count. Sometimes, we concluded, we just don't have the time to sit and watch or read all of the transformational stories of athletes overcoming adversity or political oppression...

Sometimes we don't have the attention span to learn all of the rules and techniques for a sport like, say, rugby. Sometimes we just want to go online and see if we are winning. I am willing to venture a guess that my friend and I are not alone and that some among us have the same practice. We love winners. We want to know whose winning. And ultimately we want to be on the winning side. This is probably one of our biggest challenges when we read the Bible. Whether it's the New or the Old Testament, the Bible is filled with a lot of stories about losers.

In fact this is one of the things that makes scripture unique among the ancient texts that we have access to today. Scripture contains story after story of generation after generation of people who were beat up, who were occupied, who were oppressed and who lived with the boot of some empire on their neck. The Bible is one of the few texts that we have, of a history written not by the conquerors but by the conquered, not by the winners, but by the losers. Now there are exceptions to this within the Bible, make no mistake about it. The writer of Hebrews even names a few of these stories of triumph and victory. There were moments throughout the course of history when the people of God, the people of the covenant, were on the winning side and moments when they were the conqueror. But the Bible is so wonderfully human and wholly divine that it includes far more examples of when we failed, when we lost, when we were down trodden and weary and it contains the Good News of God's undying, enduring, steadfast life-saving love for us.

Our reading from today is no different. The Letter to the Hebrews is one of the most interesting and ambiguous books in the whole Bible. For years it was attributed to the Apostle Paul who wrote a good chunk of the New Testament letters. Most of the scholarly community now agree that Hebrews was not written by Paul but by some unknown author.

Scholars have had a hard time trying to pin point the exact community to which this text is addressed and even the genre of the book itself. We call it the Letter to the Hebrews but there are only a few passages that actually read like a letter. Most of the text seems to read more like a sermon as opposed to a letter.

Which by the way, if you ever think my preaching or Patricia's preaching is too boring for you, trying reading Hebrews out loud to yourself and get back to me.

What we do know about the text, about this sermon, is that it was written to a people who were steeped in tradition and struggling to understand all that was happening to them through the lens of faith.

It's easy for us to forget that being Christian, following in the way of Jesus, wasn't some casual halfhearted commitment back in the early days of the Christian church. One was not nominally Christian back in the day. Following Jesus wasn't something you just kind of dabbled in.

Following Jesus in the latter part of the 1st Century was a dangerous proposition because Christians were not exactly beloved by the world they inhabited.

Remember that the backdrop for the story of the early Christian church was the Roman Empire. The biggest, baddest, most awesome and powerful empire ever to exist. The Roman Empire was full of winners. Big, strong, powerful winners. The Roman Empire was like the New York Yankees of Empires. They had all the resources they needed to do whatever they wanted.

The Empire was ruled by Caesar, who everyone had to call the Son of God, or 'My Lord.' Caesar was believed to be fully God and fully human and worthy of worship and adoration. The Roman Empire believed that the only way toward a true and lasting peace was by coercive violence, oppression and occupation.

They would march into your village, say convert or die, and issue an "evangelium", a proclamation of Good News, that you were part of the Roman Empire. They would say "here have some of our awesome Pax Roman, the peace of the Empire."

The early Christians were making different, radical, challenging and political claims about this man named Jesus. They were saying that Jesus, not Caesar, is the Son of God,

They were saying that Jesus not Caesar, is Lord, he is worthy of our adoration and our praise. They were claiming that the way of Jesus, the way of humble sacrificial love, is actually the way to everlasting peace, a peace beyond all understanding, a peace that is so much bigger and greater and more holy than just the absence of violence and that this is "evangelium", Good News.

The Christians, follower of Jesus, weren't swayed by winners and the powerful, they were seeking out the powerless, the weak, the vulnerable, the marginalized, everyone who had ever been kicked while they were down or were living with the boot of an empire on their neck.

They were putting themselves in solidarity with the losers, the loners, the poor because they believed in Jesus, because they believed in the resurrection, because they believed that a bigger, more beautiful world was possible if we shed this false belief that winning, gaining, and possessing are the way to abundant life.

But the early Church was populated with people just like it is today. And as time wore on, day after day after day, and the losing and the persecution and the pressure to just give in and move your allegiance to the winning side just kept coming. Some of the folks in the early church were starting to give in to this temptation.

It seems like this is the backdrop for the sermon to the Hebrews. It is a locker room speech to the downtrodden, to the bruised and the weary. The writer of Hebrews is like the coach addressing their team;

We know what it's like out there. There are narratives in this world which insist that we need to give up this whole Jesus thing and get on board with the winning team.

But make no mistake about it; the people of God have been here before. Make no mistake about it the people of God were once voices crying out under the yoke of slavery longing to taste freedom. Make no mistake about it the people of God were once a people wandering around the desert longing for a place to call home. Make no mistake about it the people of God had leaders who were real and flawed, who made mistakes and suffered, but they trusted in something beyond themselves, they had faith in something greater than themselves and that trust enabled them to endure. Make no mistake about it you are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, a great cloud of beautiful, broken, human beings who have gone on before you in faith. Make no mistake about it, you are not alone, for the Divine creator of all things, the source, the ground of all being, the Almighty, the Word, became flesh and blood and bone and made a home with us in Jesus Christ.

The writer of Hebrews said keep your eyes fixed on Jesus, look beyond the winners and losers, look beyond the rich and the poor, look beyond the right and the left, look beyond legal or illegal, look beyond male or female, look beyond gay or straight, look beyond everything else and look to Jesus, he is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith.

I love that line, Jesus is the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. God has blazed the trail for us of grace and wholeness and hope for all people, especially when we need it the most. When we've lost for what feels like the billionth time and it feels too much to bear. You don't have to carry it alone. It's not up to us alone. We don't need to do it ourselves. We don't have to be the perfect winners because Jesus perfects us with his saving grace.

A pastor once said the vision for the church of the 21st century needs to be solidarity. We don't need a community of people dispensing some "truth" which is going to fix it all. We don't have to be perfect, we don't have to be winners all the time. What we need to do is to look to Jesus and to do all that we can to love as he loves because Jesus loves with the love of God.

We need to be in solidarity with those who feel displaced and powerless; we need to be in relationship, real relationship with the poor and homeless.

We need to stand on the side of the weak, essentially what we need to be is a community of losers seeking other losers, because this is the core of a spiritual life, letting go, surrender, giving up, because Jesus said if you really want to save your life you have to be willing to lose it. Go therefore, and be a loser for Jesus. Amen.