

Psalm 130

Mercy and the Olympics

Ephesians 4:25-5:2

August 11, 2024

Watching the Olympics is always fun, in spite of all the things that conspire to ruin it; its commercialism; all the over-the-top hype, the 24-hour news cycle (which means spoilers) which has changed the way we watch them. In spite of it all, the Olympics have not lost their luster.

First of all, it is fun to see the best athletes in the world at all these different kinds of games, in one great festival of sport. It is fun to see the world come together to play games and to be inspired, rather than to compete for economic space or engage in military exercises, or any other reason why the people of the world come together, some crisis to solve.

It is fun to watch the people who will otherwise be unknown to us throughout their lives, have their moment. Perhaps most of all, for me at least, it is fun to see the competition, the games themselves, which are always interesting and end up being the star of the show.

Of course, they are a diversion, an escape from everyday realities. There is the ongoing election season, which is never over because the next one will begin the day after this one ends. And there is the world's economic struggle, which is how to procure the necessary resources for living for as many of the world's people as is possible, and why we will pay

attention to the stock market, unemployment and inflation, and interest rates.

And there are tropical storms and wildfires, regional wars and persistent poverty, and all the medical situations, and the myriad of things over which people divide, division itself, when the world is crying out for unity, along with whatever is going on in our personal lives; all these things are part of the litany from which we escape watching the gymnasts or the runners or the cyclists or whichever is your favorite to watch as the summer slowly expires.

Baron de Coubertin's vision of world peace was shattered early on in the modern Olympic era when in World Wars 1 and 2 the world did not honor the truce but instead cancelled the games. The original vision of world peace turned out not to be realistic, and we watch them in the full knowledge of that failure.

And we are faced also with the failures of those who break the rules or treat winning as the solitary goal to be pursued at all costs. And there are other failures, which most of us most of the time forgive. But we still dream. We still like the dream.

We can dream of hard work and sacrifice and teamwork and support systems; the success of otherwise ordinary people against all odds; and learning to lose with dignity and win graciously, even though not everyone who competes in the games lives up to these ideals.

One in 700,000 people participate in each Olympic games, which means, not a large percentage of the world's population, which means, not very many people. Inevitably, sooner or later, we must return and so must they to our ordinary lives and to the problems of the world and to the burdens we carry and the tasks required of us, and to the realities associated with the human condition; we all sin, we all die, and are burdened and heavy-laden under the weight of our lives and of the world's life. Life is short, and we have little control, and two weeks isn't very long for a respite to play games.

While the lessons we learn from these athletes can be instructive and inspiring, their power to transform the world is limited, so we continue to look for other sources of instruction and inspiration. Though some claim to be unmoved by it, we turn to the message of the gospel because it is not a diversion, but forces us to the central features of life.

It asks of us only *faith*, which by God's grace is a possibility for us, and sends us into the struggle without requiring anyone to be 1 in 700,000 just to play the game. What gives the gospel its fulness is that unlike the Olympics, which can be merciless, the gospel speaks to us of the mercy of God, which is offered to us all. So for just a moment or two this morning let us consider the great mercy of God.

We see it in the Psalm, which has one of the most powerful expressions of it;

“If you, Lord, kept a record of sins,  
Lord, who could stand?  
But with you there is forgiveness,  
that you may be revered.”

The usual idea is that God's mercy is to be revered, given great respect, because it is a high and noble gift. Sometimes the term is translated, “fear,” which seems strong. It is out of vogue to think of God as someone of whom one should be afraid.

But here the sense of actual fear can be helpful, not because God is threatening harm but because of the tremendous power required for the restraint of just anger. God alone is strong enough to hold back the force of judgment, and instead act out of love. It is not a bad idea to entertain the possibility that one should actually be afraid in the presence of such strength, even though it is used to show mercy, which is not fearsome.

We also see it in the epistle, where we find Paul giving very practical advice to believers about how to live. As was apparently true then, so it is also true now, the attitudes of the heart Paul is encouraging as well as the habits of speech, and the way of handling anger, are not thought of as normal, not very realistic.

The exhortations Paul gives, seem extreme, almost saintly, involves unrealistic expectations. To be sure, they *do* represent higher aspirations that are worthy of attention, and are more than one might expect to achieve without God's help. Paul's point is that in

Christ we are not without God's help. Thus, in that case, it is not unreasonable to seek this higher standard, such as what is described in his letter:

“Speak truthfully . . . in your anger do not sin. Do not let the sun go down while you are still angry (in another place, James reminds us, ‘human anger does not accomplish God’s will). . . . Let no unwholesome talk come out of your mouths, but only what is helpful (it is interesting, don’t you think, that Paul is asking for disciplined *speech*). . . .

Put away bitterness, rage and anger, brawling and slander, every form of malice.”

And then this, which is as powerful as the line in the psalm, “be kind and compassionate to one another, forgiving each other as in Christ, God has forgiven you.”

This behavior does not characterize the Olympics: There are brutal realities there; if one clips a barrier in the steeplechase, or falls off the Balance Beam, or contracts Covid, or steps on the line accidentally while admiring the throw, or false starts in a race, there is no recourse, no mercy.

Neither does it characterize our cultural discourse, nor is it the tenor of conversations on much of social media. Is it realistic to expect of anybody, much less believers, this standard of restraint and goodwill? Paul goes on to an even higher aspiration.

“Be imitators of God, therefore, as dearly loved children, and live a life of love, just as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us as a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God.”

Some of our Olympic heroes came closer to the embodiment of these exhortations than others, but the ones who did not, often got the greater attention, but there is more at stake than simple public perception of Christian character; for our very health is wrapped up in this manner of life.

It all begins with God's mercy, which comes to us before the beginning, and continues throughout our lives no matter the successes or failures of love and faith which so characterize us and the world, and is the basis of our future hope.

[Back](#)

[Home](#)