

Invisible Olympics

February 25, 2018

I guess many people have been glued to the Olympics this past two weeks, amazed by the abilities that the athletes have developed and awed by what the human body can do. For two weeks we see these incredible skills on display but the Olympics really goes on for the other 206 weeks that separate one Olympics from another. This is the invisible Olympics, the weeks and months and years of disciplined training that makes these athletes capable of such astounding feats. The Olympics is that tip of the iceberg event where the real work is hidden beneath the ocean.

This made me think about other invisible Olympics, the Olympics that happens in each of our lives as we, too, struggle to arrive at our goal. Our goals may not be gold medals. It may be something as hard and as simple as filling an empty day, or understanding that insurance statement for the doctor's bill, or figuring out how to make it to the next paycheck. Something like fighting back those feelings of panic when we're faced with yet another form to fill out or when yet another piece of the car falls off. Something like how to stop crying all the time or how to get out of bed in the morning. There aren't any medals given out for those days, or those months, or those years that we face the challenges that no one

talks about. There aren't any medals in the invisible Olympics. In this Olympics, we are all contenders.

I came up with a few events for this Olympics.

The 'keeping on going despite repeated difficulties' event. This is a popular event, not because it is enjoyable but because it is so common. Strength and stamina are necessary to compete. This actually is often a series of events, sort of like a triathlon. Some of the events in this series are initiated a combination of job loss, illness, mental as well as physical, loss of important person, or even small but persistent disasters to house, car or other essential possessions, or unexpected expenses. Usually this event involves a series of these difficulties, not chosen by the participant, which often come close together. Though three events in a row is what is usually considered the usual combination, many find that these events come in multiples of threes, or sixes, or more. Heavier and heavier weights are piled on the performer as they continue. Speed is not an advantage in this event but endurance is. In point of fact, there seem to be many endurance events in the Invisible Olympics.

Speed is, however, essential for the next type of competition. In this series, the ability to adapt rapidly to changing conditions is what makes the difference between being able to continue to perform. Though many of the same activities are

involved in these sports as were mentioned before, such as illness, economic issues, etc., in these events, the performer needs to respond while the course is changed beyond all recognition and at a fast clip. A typical activity in this event might be retraining to keep in work while working, while taking care of small children or an aged parent or both. Both the needs of work and the needs of dependents are constantly shifting while the athletes, sliding down the slalom course, try to increase their speed and stay upright. To make matters more challenging, this event is often run at the same time and by the same person as the endurance event.

The third event is judged on the grace of the performer. Often, performers are judged more by themselves than by any onlooker, including the judges. Often performers judge themselves much more harshly. We might compare this event to the skating events. It is done by dancing, no matter how slick the ice, dancing even when things go wrong, when performers fall or even when they drop their partner. No matter what the error, no matter how foolish or angry or sad the contestant, they finish with a smile and a bow. As in the real Olympics, the ability to finish this event, even when it seems pointless, is both heartrending and admirable. So many here, so many we know who are not here, are regular contestants in this kind of event. Perhaps their close friends and family know the heartbreak they hide

behind a smile, a joke, a kind word to others but very few people know the turmoil or sorrow that they face behind their smiles.

I have seen many of you compete in these events and you have seen many others do so. Some here may think I am only talking about them. That isn't the case. I would be willing to believe that everyone here has been a contestant in one or more of these events, sometimes on a regular basis, some right now.

I decided to do this sermon because I'm going to be away for a month and though I'm looking forward to getting away, though I know that a month isn't really a long time, I'm going to miss all of you and I'm going to miss this church. So I wanted to dedicate one Sunday to letting all of you know how much I've appreciated all of you, not just for working for the church, but appreciated all of you for your courage and steadfastness that is often invisible.

Probably the most common question asked of religion is to justify why there is suffering. To justify why our lives can sometimes look like endless Olympic events with no ceremonies and no medals. Believe me, if I could, I would have a huge ceremony where I would hang medals from every neck. But even the most elaborate ceremony might not be enough to justify suffering and help us feel OK about why things go wrong, why there is heartbreak and disappointment.

There are many explanations for sorrow, for the universal experience of grief, frustration, despair. Some think that these are the experiences that refine us, that make us better people. Some tie this to rewards after this life, such as living with God in heaven or having a better life through reincarnation. Some think that this is simply how the world works and there is no other explanation. My pipeline to the infinite is evidently clogged, because I can't tell you which of these is correct. The essence of this denomination is to give everyone the freedom to explore these questions for themselves. But I can tell you that, for me, the experience of sorrow is one that can open us up to other people, if we choose to let it. We can reach out and see how others are also suffering and find, in our desire to heal them, healing ourselves. We see that our struggles teach us much about how to help others in their struggles. When we understand what makes us able to go on, we learn just how other people hurt and what can help them go on. In order to do that, it is necessary to open ourselves to other people's pain. That can be frightening. Somehow, it seems to take effort, more effort than would seem reasonable to do this, to feel for another person or a group of people, particularly people we don't know. It becomes easier to be self-protective and find reasons that will shut out our full awareness of other people's lives. It becomes easier to blame the person doing the suffering.

So maybe there should be another Olympic event, the compassion Olympics, an Olympics that recognizes that it is hard to be open to other people's pain. An Olympics that recognizes that some people are more able to do that than others. An Olympics in which we are given role models of people who have stretched and exercised and practiced so that they can run in the grueling events of empathy and caring. We all know people that could compete in this event. Most of you here, I have seen in action with each other, and I think we have an outstanding team for the event right in this place. Here there are people already entered in that invisible Olympic event.

Just as with physical exercise, it is hard to undertake the discipline that lets us go beyond our safe and comfortable world and understand others. It is hard to choose to love those who are unlovable, to understand those whose actions seem so unreasonable. But, just like physical exercise, we are probably better for a little mental and emotional stretching and lifting. The alternative, when we go into our own caves and keep our emotional life narrow, is to live in a very small world indeed. Too often, perhaps in response to our increased awareness of others, we protect ourselves by the use of blame and judgement. But that only rebounds on us and, paradoxically, as we try to avoid the pain of understanding, our own pain becomes more intense.

It becomes more intense because, in the invisible Olympics that is life, we are on an invisible team. Unlike in other competitions, there is only one team. As our team, the whole of humanity, does better, so do we do better. When we imagine that there are other teams and that we must defeat them for our team to win, we are only fighting ourselves. Just like the Olympics are supposed to be, even in the individual events, each person is not there to win for themselves but are there to do their best to help the team win. As the human team gets better, each individual gets better. Even if sorrow and stress are unavoidable, because we are made of mortal and perishable stuff, we can take care of others and have more care ourselves in a world dedicated to caring rather than to hurting.

We see that we are on the same team most clearly with people we know best, especially people who are like us. It becomes harder to see that in people we do not know. It is harder to see that in people that are not like us. But this is where suffering can have a strange advantage. Sometimes a shared grief bridges the gap between people. Those suffering from a similar disease find they have a surprising amount in common with others who are so afflicted. I was surprised, when I drove someone to dialysis for awhile, to find a thriving community of dialysis patients and their friends and families in the waiting room of the treatment center. These were people who had come there from many different places, many different backgrounds, often with many different views on politics or religion, but in their

shared need for treatment, they found common ground that transcended these differences. They were concerned about each other. They wept with each other. And they laughed with each other. This was a leaderless and nameless group. No one had organized it, or called it together, but it worked.

Anyone who has ever belonged to an intentional group for support, a twelve-step group or other peer led group, knows the gratitude many people have for that group and the closeness that develops within that setting. Judgement is set aside. Support by those who know the terrain of that particular issue is what is important. Many hands are available to guide people through that journey.

I think a church such as this also has that role and that here we challenge each other to do this for each other. We are asked to understand each other each other's terms, not just from our own perspective. We look through each other's eyes, not just our own. This, to me, is the ultimate spiritual discipline. It's hard, but that's the point of discipline. It's like the discipline necessary to create a world class speed skater or an Olympic gymnast. Reading about it doesn't work. It's a practice.

Just as each record exceeded shows that the human body is capable of more than we imagined was possible, so, too, may we be amazed at what heights, what speed, what dexterity the human spirit is capable of reaching.

Leonard Cohen has some pertinent words on the role of suffering. He said

There's a crack in everything

That's how the light gets in.

It is not in perfection that we learn or stretch. We all need more light. The world needs more light. It is in daring to grow that we often crack, because our old skin no longer fits. The Olympics teaches us what growing and daring and going to new levels can do to increase human ability. Now we need to do the same with our emotional abilities in order to have more light in our relationships with others.

Rumi, a 13th-century poet and Sufi mystic also has something to say about letting in the light. He says:

Let a teacher wave away the flies and put a plaster on the wound.

Don't turn your head. Keep looking at the bandaged place.

That's where the light enters you.

And don't believe for a moment that you're healing yourself.

We are all, in the best of all possible worlds, healing each other. We are all, in the best of all possible world, cheering for each other. We are all, in the best of all possible world, alchemists, turning the lead of sorrow into the gold medal of understanding.

