20th Sunday of Ordinary Time C “Spiritual Atheletics”

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Like many of you, I have really enjoyed watching the Olympics. It is wonderful watching these young people work hard at a sport and finally have the opportunity to compete on the world stage. I believe it doesn’t matter if an athlete wins any medals. Just being there makes them a champion. If we studied what motivates them to work so hard day in and day out to make it to this level, I think we would get a number of different answers. I think it is safe to say most want to be the best they can be. I would imagine most sincerely want to represent their country and families well. Some perhaps seek the fame that comes with being a champion. I believe there are quite a few who find in their talents an opportunity to praise God. For instance, United States Gymnast and Gold Medalist, Simone Biles, shared with Catholic News Service this past week that she carries with her a small statue to St. Sebastian, the patron saint of athletes, and a rosary her mother gave her. Isn’t that great?

Simone Biles got me thinking about what motivates us to do what we do. Not all of us can be a gold medalist at the Olympics, but we all have tasks, even goals, that we strive for. What motivates us? One of the things I enjoy most about watching the Olympic Games is watching the intensity and seriousness in these athletes’ faces right before their event begins. Everything they have worked years for will be over in a matter of minutes if not seconds, and you can see the intensity of the moment in their faces. It is quite remarkable, in my opinion, is that what separates the winners from the rest are typically seconds if not fractions of a second. All their life’s work boiling down to the difference of a half second! No wonder there is such intensity in their faces before their events. I mention this because this is a great way to understand the Gospel Reading for this weekend.

The Gospel reading begins with Jesus’ remarkable exclamation, “I have come to set the earth on fire, and how I wish it were already blazing! There is a baptism with which I must be baptized, and how great is my anguish until it is accomplished!” I think that sentiment is on the hearts, minds and faces of Olympic Athletes right before their events. And this is also the best way to read the Gospel reading today. Jesus is the Son of God who has been sent to win for us the opportunity for everlasting life through his passion, death and resurrection. And this is no small endeavor, and so in today’s Gospel, we are given a glimpse into Jesus’ enthusiasm and intensity as he gets ready for the salvific mission he has been preparing his whole life on earth for. He is ready to go, he is in position, and he is ready for the starting bell.

I think we can remember moments in our lives when we felt that intensity about accomplishing something. It could have been a sport that we competed heavily in during our younger days. It could have been a business deal of a lifetime that you have worked on for months or years finally coming to a close.
Perhaps it was the intensity that grips the soul prior to finally gaining the courage to propose to your future spouse. There are many moments in our lives that we all have felt the intensity of the moment, where there was no small degree of anguish until we have completed our mission. Of course, even the Olympic Athletes would be the first to say that it does no good to win a Gold medal if we fail to qualify in life, right? So perhaps the most anxious and intense moments of a disciple would deal with the people and the relationships most dear to us.

And this brings us to the second part of our Gospel reading that can be a little disturbing to us. Jesus says, “Do you think that I have come to establish peace on the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division. From now on a household of five will be divided, three against two and two against three…” Why does Jesus say this? There are a couple reasons I think and the first one has to do with the fact that Christianity was illegal in the first several centuries. It was a capital offence to be a Christian in the Roman Empire because the Emperor claimed divinity for himself and he didn’t like the competition. In those days, sharing with a family member that you were now a Christian would have put the whole family in danger.

Meanwhile, as much as we would like to believe this kind of thing only happened long ago, there are still areas of the world where this kind of persecution still happens today as we all know. There are still places today where a kid might come home from college and share with a parent that he or she is a Christian now and the parents might respond with panic, “are you nuts…you have just put us all in danger”. And this still happens today. I think of the intensity of the faith of Christians in places like Syria or Northern Africa, places where it is dangerous to be a Christian. I sometimes think that the intensity of their faith feels more like that of an Olympic Athlete whereas ours seems perhaps less so at times. This is just my opinion. However, I think this is a helpful exercise for us all to entertain in our prayers at times, thinking about Christians who live in areas of profound persecution and then ask ourselves, “what is my faith made of”?

Perhaps the author of Hebrews in our Second Reading gives us good advice on how to look at this spiritual challenge. He says, “let us rid ourselves of every burden and sin that clings to us and persevere in running the race that lies before us while keeping our eyes fixed on Jesus, the leader and perfecter of faith.” The author mentions that the context here for this early Christian community is the cloud of witnesses that surround them. The word witness in Greek is the word we have for “martyr”. It is the witness of so many in the community, the intensity of their faith that kept them all in the race with their eyes fixed on Christ.
Back to our Gospel reading now, I think that there is a second reason that Jesus may have made this comment about family members divided against family members. I think Jesus also had the foresight to see this kind of thing happening in any household any time say perhaps a child might simply refuse to go to church with their parents. Sometimes this seems to be in the job description of a young person, nevertheless, it can be a source of division in the family. Parents work hard at passing on the faith to their children and sometimes it happens that children turn away from the faith and this can be a cause of a great deal of pain and anguish in the hearts of parents. This reality of family member divided against family member due to faith makes me sometimes wonder: if children really knew in their hearts their parents’ personal story of why Jesus is important to them at a heart level rather than a head level, if they would have been so blithe to cast aside their faith.

I mention this because I really think we Catholics do not do a good enough job of telling our story, our personal story of why Jesus is important to us, how Jesus helped us out of a jam in life or helped lead us to our vocation or helped guide us through life. When we are asked about our personal story of what our relationship with Jesus looks like, do we rise to the challenge and share from the heart or do find ourselves stuck at the starting line? Can we share the story from our heart with others, especially with our children and our family members, why a relationship with Jesus is important? If we were more effective at sharing our story, our sacred story, I wonder whether if this would help with the divisions that seem to rise in every family at times regarding the celebration of our faith, our precious faith.

Of course, this level of contemplation and faith sharing requires a lot of work. Perhaps, Gospel readings like we have this weekend might challenge us to feel a little bit of the kind of seriousness and hard work an Olympic Athlete goes through each day to prepare for their main event. The difference is, of course, the work we put into our spiritual lives and into faith sharing with others can have the real outcome of influencing the eternal destinies of the people closest to us by introducing them to Jesus who is the way, the truth and the life.

Or, as St. Paul says in 1st Corinthians in a passage very similar to our second reading and is very appropriate to consider while watching the Olympics, “Do you not know that the runners in a stadium all run in the race, but only one wins the prize? Run so to win! Every athlete exercises discipline in every way. They do it to win a perishable crown, but we an imperishable one”, through Christ our Lord. Amen.