

I don't know about you, but I have spent every night of the last week on the sofa glued to the television set watching the Olympics in Beijing, China. I loved the opening ceremonies. I suppose it has to do with my addiction to any type of liturgy. I love the drama, the music, the pyrotechnics, the processions, the speeches and the history.

I suppose I am also fascinated with the Olympics because of the great respect I have for these athletes. Some have trained their entire lives for this opportunity. They have kept long practice hours to achieve their best. I am in awe of the athletes' self-discipline. They have fought long and hard for the privilege to compete, sacrificing time with their families, or time in school, or time at work.

But as much as I have cheered for Michael Phelps and all of the winners from my comfy couch around the world from all of the action, I'm also mesmerized by the thousands of athletes that we never see. I want to know the stories of the underdogs who never make it on the Today Show to share their medals with the world. I ache for those who never stand on the podium and hear their national anthem played. I want to be there yelling their name. Go, go, go! You can do it. You are winner. We are glad you are here. We don't know how you do it.

I suppose we can sympathize with the underdogs more than with the gold medalists. Most of us don't have medals hanging in our closets. We know more about losing than we do about standing on the podium. It doesn't feel good to be left out or to be undesired.

In this gospel reading from Matthew, Jesus is trying to retreat with his disciples to the district of Tyre and Sidon. They were trying to escape from Galilee for a while because Jesus had stirred up some conflict with the Pharisees and Scribes. Jesus and the disciples were trying to have a few days of peace and quiet.

But just as they thought that they had escaped it all, this 'Canaanite' woman, who wanted her daughter to be healed of the demons that possessed her, approached Jesus. Now the Canaanites were obviously Gentiles and old enemies of the Jews. They were considered pagans and it would have been incredibly inappropriate for a Jew to speak to a Canaanite, much less a woman. So at first, Jesus simply ignores her. She pursues him a second time, and the disciples want her to be sent away. Then Jesus states that he "was sent for the lost sheep of the house of Israel" only. It's as if he's trying to draw the line somewhere, after all, he can't reach out to everyone by himself, right?

And then the woman pleads for help once more, "Lord, help me." Jesus responds with one of the most difficult verses in the Bible, "It is not fair to take the children's food and throw it to the dogs." Wait, did Jesus just called this woman a dog? How offensive!

But, this woman takes no offense at him; she wasn't intimidated in the slightest bit. She's been called worse before. She swallows what pride she has left and says, "Yes, Lord, yet even the dogs eat the crumbs that fall from their masters' table." She knows that God has more than enough mercy to go around, and that even the crumbs of God's mercy will completely heal her daughter.

Jesus thought he was letting this woman know that he had nothing else to give, that he had to take care of his own people. But this woman was not going to settle for anything else than her daughter's complete healed. Jesus realized that she was right; he noticed how strong her faith was, stronger than that of the disciples. She got it, and he immediately healed her daughter.

It's interesting that Jesus is the one who learned the lesson today. Not the woman or the disciples or the Pharisees. Jesus learned that the ministry to which he was called was much greater than he ever imagined. He thought he was sent to save only one group of people, but rather God had more in store for him. He was sent to save us all, regardless of our abilities. Regardless of our home countries or the money in our pockets or the medals around our necks.

But you know my friends, just by our presence here this morning, we are the medalists of the world. We get to wake up and stand on that platform every day, while there are so many others that are left in our dust. There are so many others in our world and in our own community who are seeking the help of Jesus. They are seeking the help of Jesus just like the Canaanite woman because he is their last resort. Those people call our office every day seeking the little help we can give them for their rent or the BGE bill. “All of the Canaanites keep coming here, all of the outsiders, all of the underdogs, all of the refugees come to our doors, knocking, begging, shouting, expecting Christ to help them at here at St. Margaret’s.”ⁱ

But even though we are privileged in our society and by the many things we own, the underdog, “The outsider, the outcast we know lives inside each of us, if only we dig down deep enough to confront him.”ⁱⁱ

The truth is that we have all come here this morning looking for Jesus. We have come here to fulfill some need or emptiness deep within us. And we have heard or perhaps maybe we even know that Jesus can help us and ultimately heal us. And he has. He has included us in his embrace. We feel that embrace with old friends and new as we exchange the peace. But even more so, he has enthusiastically sought us out and invited us to the banquet table. We feel that as we break bread together and open our arms of hospitality to our community and help others in need.

Just like Jesus, we know that we cannot help everyone. We only have so much to go around. “But in this Gospel story, Jesus’ mind—God’s mind gets changed. In the end, this Gospel teaches us that God, Jesus cannot say “no” to anyone who asks him for mercy, for help, for healing, for inclusion. God’s mercy is always expanding, always growing, always deepening. God—Jesus—digs down deep into his reserves of love, he is made uncomfortable, and he chooses to include, help, and heal someone he wasn’t planning on including, helping, or healing.”ⁱⁱⁱ

And because Christ cannot say no, then we at St. Margaret’s cannot say no. We are the body of Christ as Paul tells the Corinthians. We will come to this table to re-fill ourselves in Christ, the only one who can heal and include us all. The only who has enough mercy to shower upon each of us to refresh our souls, our hearts and our bodies.

But with that refreshment, with that abundant gift of grace comes a ministry and a responsibility. Jesus says in the gospel of Luke chapter 12, ‘From everyone to whom much has been given, much will be required.’ Not just expected but required – that means not an option. Not a choice. Not when you get around to it. But required.

When we come back from this table filled and equipped, we have no choice but to set our faces toward the work we have been fed to do. “The last, the lost, the least will” continue to “make their way here” because they know that Christ is here. We are here.” For hundreds of years this church has been a place “of refuge,” a “house of safety and prayer for all people who can make it to our doors—because Christ dwells inside.”

“We have been blessed with the abundance of a great feast. We have been saved by God’s grace and mercy and made part of the body of Christ. But now as the body of Christ, we, like Jesus, are being pushed to draw deep within ourselves, to include those we’d rather exclude, and to go beyond our comfort zones and to empty ourselves until we have nothing left to give—even our own lives. Because that is what Christ did”^{iv} for the underdog.

ⁱ **The Rev. The Reverend Gray Lesesne**, my Virginia Theological Seminary classmate. **The Fourteenth Sunday after Pentecost: Proper 15** Matthew 15:21-28 Sermon preached at Christ Church Cathedral on August 17, 2008

ⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

ⁱⁱⁱ *Ibid.*

^{iv} *Ibid.*