

Go For the Gold

Matthew 19:16-26

I know we concluded our series on the 23rd Psalm last Sunday, but I wanted to share one additional paraphrase that was given to me by Nancy Hagmaier. Called Psalm 23 (for the Work Place)

Have you been watching the Olympic games? If you have you will recognize these names: Simone Biles, Michael Phelps, Usain Bolt, Simone Manuel, Katie Ladecky. And what do they all have in common? They all won gold medals in this year Olympics in Rio DeJaneiro. And some won a lot more than one. For Michael Phelps, the total was 5, 4 for Simone Biles and 4 for Katie Ladecky. What a tremendous display of athletic performance. Watching Michael Phelps at the age of 31, still achieve what he did, and Simone who is being described as perhaps the best gymnast of all time. Pretty amazing! It has truly been an exciting two weeks of competition.

You know for each of the athletes, there is this dream of winning a gold medal. The gold medal, a symbol recognized around the world as the pinnacle of athletic success and achievement. It is the desire of every competitor – to “Go for the Gold”.

“Go for the Gold.” I believe that’s a statement that pertains not only to Olympians, but it really reflects a basic quest that we encounter in life. All of us are searching for something, in one sense looking for the gold. Not the gold medal of an Olympic contest, but we are searching for that prize which will satisfy us. It’s part of that inner search, where we are asking ourselves, “What is my purpose in life?, What am I striving for, Where do I find meaning and fulfillment?” These are not new questions, these are the questions people of every time and generation ask. This inner searching. Where is the gold? And it is a search that can lead us in many directions and to many places.

There are some who are literally looking for the gold. Believing if I could amass enough of a fortune, I will have made it, I will have found the prize of life. We become like those who sacrificed it all to participate in the gold rush of the 1800’s.

That’s the gold medal some of us are looking for. As Tevye sings in Fiddler on the Roof: “If I were a rich man.” I love some of the lyrics of that song: I’d see my wife, my Golde, looking like a rich man's wife With a proper double-chin. Supervising meals to her heart's delight. I see her putting on airs and strutting like a peacock. Oy, what a happy mood she's in. Screaming at the servants, day and night.

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The most important men in town would come to fawn on me! They would ask me to advise them, Like a Solomon the Wise."If you please, Reb Tevye..." "Pardon me, Reb Tevye..." Posing problems that would cross a rabbi's eyes! And it won't make one bit of difference if I answer right or wrong. When you're rich, they think you really know!" This is one of life's illusions: If I accumulate enough. If I only had a big bank account. Then I will know I have found happiness. It's as old as the story of the people in Moses' day. While he's up on the mountain receiving the 10 commandments, Aaron and the people of God are worshipping a golden calf. Gold had become their idol.

Well, that can be the pursuit of some of us, for others it can be the gold of popularity or prestige, or fame. I want to be important. I want to be listed on the who's who list of America. One time marathon runner Alberta Slolizar said it well: "Fame is just an illusion. It means nothing." But we pursue it because think if others see me as important, I will really be happy.

In reality, there are all kinds of ways we go for the gold. We seek the prize of life, this search for happiness, whether it be material success, worldly pleasures, intellectual attainment, it's that inner desire to go for the gold.

We heard about someone in our Scripture reading this morning who also had that inner quest. Searching, looking for meaning. He was a young man who seemed to have it all together. He had lots of money. He is described as a ruler. So he was a person of authority, and he was a man of sound moral character. What more could you ask for? Yet there was still an inner longing in his heart. And that inner quest surfaced as a question in his mind that needed to be answered. And he thought, maybe this is what I am looking for. Maybe this will fulfill my inner longings, meet my deepest need. And so he has a question that he needs to find an answer for. What must I do to get eternal life? That's a soul searching question. You could say it's life's ultimate question. Maybe you could say it like: How do I get life's gold medal? The rich young ruler trying to figure it out: "How do I go for the gold. How do I find the ultimate meaning in life? This inquiry leads him to Jesus. For he has heard about this great teacher, this rabbi who may be able to help him. Maybe Jesus could provide an answer to this inner search for the gold. Good teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life? Jesus is able to look into his heart and mind and gets this young man to think about his searching thus far. He reminds him about

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keeping the commandments. In reply he asks, which ones? Kind of seems strange coming from this man who probably knew the commandments backwards and forwards, but his keeping of the law was not doing it for him. Jesus proceeds to list some of the commandments and includes one of the great commandments: love your neighbor as yourself. And when this man hears this, all he can say is: If that's the real test. I been there, done that. I've kept all of the commandments, but you know, Lord it still hasn't satisfied, Just following the law – its's a dead-end street. My life is still lacking. It seems that this rich young ruler had come to realize that his good moral behavior was not enough and it didn't meet the inner quest of his soul.

How many of us have faced the same dilemma. Trying to satisfy that inner longing, by trying to do the right things, trying to please God with our behavior. But the Scripture tells us plainly that eternal life is not the result of what we can do, not a result of our own merit. No we are depending on what God has already done for us, putting our trust in his grace and as a result seeing what God can do through us.

What I am saying is that we do not obtain the gold medal of life by earning it, by working for it. All of our striving will not do it. This gold medal comes by admitting we are unfit for it, it is not by our merit, but by our trust in God's amazing grace. Here's how the Bible describes it in the book of Romans: "the wages of sin is death, but the free gift of God is eternal life in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Let's go back to this young man's encounter with Jesus. Jesus didn't leave him without hope. He knew his heart and that there was only one way for this man to find the answer to his searching. And really it is the road we all need to take. The answer is found in letting go. Surrendering our will to God where we can turn the attention of our heart from the things of this world to the things of God. I have to believe that may mean something different for each person. For the rich young ruler, it was his great wealth that got in the way. It had a hold of his heart and to find real peace, to obtain that true gold medal it would mean letting go. He calls this man to make a decision. If you want to find the answer to your searching, "go, sell your possessions, give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven, and come, follow me."

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It was a test of whether he would surrender and find the answer to his quest. A decision he was unwilling to make. And the Bible says: "He went away, grieving, for he had many possessions."

He missed standing on the podium for the true gold medal, because he couldn't let go of what was gripping his heart. You know, not everyone who participates in the Olympics receives a gold medal. For every athlete who captures the prize, there are hundreds who go away empty-handed. And so it was for this man. He went away, with many possessions, but still empty handed, sad, grieving, missing the opportunity to find real life.

This is the personal quest we are all on. Looking for life, looking for meaning, and seeking the ultimate prize of a fulfilled life, and life eternal. And my question is simply this: Where have you been searching for that prize? Where have you been looking for that true gold medal?

One of this year Olympians was Allyson Felix. Growing up in a Christian household, she was labeled as the fastest girl on the planet as a teenager. She competes in the 100, 200 and 400 meters. Felix won three gold medals in 2012. This year just missed gold by 7 hundredths of a second in the 400 meters. She is the most decorated female athlete in US history with 7 medals. I love her testimony: "My faith inspires me so much. It is the very reason that I run. I feel that my running is completely a gift from God and it is my responsibility to use it to glorify him. My faith also helps me not be consumed with winning, but to see the big picture and what life is really all about." That bigger picture leads us to think about life's ultimate questions. To discover an answer to that inner quest of the soul. You and I are called to go for the gold, and to discover that the key to our finding it, is not in our goodness, not in what we have, or what we can do; the key is in our personal surrender to the Lord, for He alone can save us. When the disciples saw this encounter with the rich young ruler, it caused them to ask the question: "who can be saved?" With man it is impossible, but with God all things are possible. It is the work God does for us.

One of the great stories related to the Olympics is told in the film: Chariots of Fire. It is a true story about two British runners competing in the 1924 Olympics. Eric Liddell, a devout Christian, was encouraged by his missionary dad to "run in God's Name, and let the world stand back and wonder." Contrarily, Harold Abrahams, Liddell's teammate, ran for personal glory.

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On the boat to the Paris Olympics, Liddell learned that to compete in the 100-meter dash, his best distance and the race he was favored to win, he had to run the qualifying heats on Sunday. He resolved not to run on the Sabbath. During a reception in Paris, Liddell was pressured by Scotland's aristocracy to run.

Unruffled by the pressure, Liddell responded, "I'm afraid there are no ways, sir. I won't run on the Sabbath, and that's final. God made countries, and God makes the kings and the rules by which they govern. And those rules say that the Sabbath is his, and I, for one, intend to keep it that way."

The Sunday Liddell could have been running, he worshiped in a Paris church and preached from Isaiah 40, which states: "But they that wait upon the Lord shall renew their strength; they shall mount up with wings as eagles; they shall run, and not be weary; and they shall walk, and not faint."

Abrahams, however, prepared for the race and confessed to Liddell, "I used to be afraid to lose. But now I am afraid to win. I have ten seconds in which to prove the reason for my existence, and even then, I'm not sure I will." Abrahams did win the gold medal in the 100-meter, while Liddell applauded him on the sidelines. But that gold medal gave him only fleeting satisfaction. Later in the Olympics, Liddell competed in the 400-meter, an event he had not trained for and was not favored to win. Surprisingly, Liddell not only won but also broke the world record.

What powerful story of following one's commitment to his faith. To remain steadfast to that faith. The principle of his faith which perhaps in our current day seems almost fanatical but truly a demonstration of what was most important in Liddell's quest for life's real gold medal. It's a call to let go of those things that keep us from discovering real life. It is answering the question: What is our life's supreme desire? The goal of life? Are we willing to surrender whatever may hinder us from knowing God and living by trusting Christ completely. It is giving my whole life to the Lord, heart, mind, and soul. Finding the answer to life's deepest questions. Having gone for the gold, and experiencing real life, even eternal life.

Close with prayer inviting people to turn to the Lord, trusting in God's grace and surrendering those things that would hinder them from finding real life.