

Rooted and Grounded in Love

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Ephesians 3:14-21

I will fully admit that I am a big fan of the Olympics. In certain circles – at least some things I read and listen to – it's become trendy to say how passé the Olympics are. I get it. The sexism. The racism. The corruption. The crass commercialism. The idea that was once so compelling now seems so quaint, or naïve, or something, that AMATEUR athletes from across the globe gather every four years – with no performance enhancing drugs in their bodies – for competition, global harmony, for the love of sport. All of that is long past. And still I remain a fan. I get all of the cynicism and skepticism. And still. And yet. The human interest stories. The more obscure athletes getting their every four-year moment to shine in the sun. The underdogs from underdog nations pulling major upsets.

If I were the commissioner of the world, or even the commissioner of the Olympics, I would make some major changes, of course. I would rule that anything I have ever done – ride a skateboard or play 3-on-3 basketball in my driveway, might get reconsideration as an Olympic event. I would do something about the money, to be sure.

But I would remain a fan, and will watch as much as I can – appropriately – in the next few weeks, spending time with Simone and Katie but also with the lesser-known sports.

I don't know if you watched the opening ceremony or not. We did, or did until we fell asleep. I've always loved it, and loved it Friday night, even with the eerie empty silence of a COVID impacted stadium. I loved the dazzling display of drones. I loved the human pictograms (you have to look it up). I loved the parade of nations, even when walking into an empty stadium – their joy, their outfits, the whole deal.

I was slightly disappointed that NBC did not show one of my more favorite serious moments, the taking of the Olympic oath. A commercial was deemed more

important. It's always a good moment that frames the days to follow. I know that it is symbolic, mostly, that athletes will not always follow it. Nonetheless, I like it.

This year, six people took the oath, three men and three women, two athletes, two coaches, two judges. "We promise to take part in these Olympic Games, respecting and abiding by the rules and in the spirit of fair play, inclusion and equality. Together we stand in solidarity and commit ourselves to sport without doping, without cheating, without any form of discrimination. We do this for the honor of our teams, in respect to the fundamental principles of Olympism, and to make the world a better place through sport." The oath has been taken since 1920. This year, it was revised slightly to include the words "inclusion" and "equality." The words about doping and cheating were added more recently as well.

I like the words of the oath. Even if they serve as symbols, even if naïve symbols, even if every athlete will not live up to them, there they are, out there, for all to see, a performance benchmark. You could be a pole vaulter from Brunei, one of those countries with 2 or 3 athletes overall whose chance of winning is about as reliable as the Phillies bullpen; you could be a highly trained, highly compensated athlete, a Chinese table tennis player or Russian weightlifter or Jamaican sprinter. Still, you have pledged yourself to live by those words, and the principles that undergird them.

Enough about Olympics, except for this. I think of vows that we make. Last Sunday we made baptism vows for our children, vows that get played out as our youth travel to Virginia. We have made membership vows sometime along the way. Some of us – elders, deacons, ministers – have made ordination vows. Words set in front of us. We have pledged ourselves to live by those words, and the principles that undergird them. Our version of "we will play hard, we will play fair, we won't cheat."

I cannot say for certain that I go home every day, and when asked how my day was that I respond, "Well, I did pretty well in terms of upholding my ordination vows today." Or my baptism vows. Or my wedding vows. But I can say, and perhaps you can as well, that when I think about it, I can be grateful that I have those words, those ideals, as a kind of measuring stick.

Spoken or unspoken, articulated or not, we have a sense, do we not, when we live life, make decisions, that adhere to the fundamental principles that matter to us.

Our cynical world appears not to be surprised when a politician is caught cheating, either with another person, or financially. But I often find myself being surprised. Or when an athlete cheats. Or a minister.

Now I know that the words said by a six Olympians will not prevent someone from doing something they shouldn't. Wedding vows themselves don't prevent certain behaviors. Something more fundamental does.

So we find ourselves again in Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus, the Ephesians. I'd encourage you to take the 15 minutes to read it, perhaps between archery rounds. You will be edified, deeply edified. Paul has already told us that human history has changed because of Jesus, that fear and anxiety have been replaced by grace, that death has no power over us. He has told us that we are no longer strangers or aliens, but citizens in God's household. He has told us that every dividing wall has been broken down. He has told us that Christ is our peace. These are important words to claim and reclaim, when it feels as if our world is on fire – literally and symbolically – when division is deep, when COVID's path seems uncertain and unending.

These are important words, fundamental stuff, and paragraph by paragraph, verse by verse, word by word, Paul keeps drilling down, the bedrock of faith, to our core principles. Paul has been a prisoner, a grateful prisoner, he says, to these principles, to this vision. Because of grace, he says, he has not lost hope even in the face of sufferings. And he encourages us as well not to lose hope. What would it look like now for us to be the people in the world who do not lose hope?

And then his prayer, that "Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love." No time for agricultural metaphors today with all this Olympic stuff, but even a non-green thumb like me knows the importance of a strong and sturdy root system. A plant can't grow if its roots are unable to take in nourishment. And a tree will fall over in a strong wind, as some did this week, be uprooted, if the roots have not anchored it in the earth. Rooted and grounded in love. The core principle, love, the core vision by which we live our life, because the love of Christ has made it so.

Alan Brehm writes: "The bottom line in the Christian life is that it's all something that God does in us; in fact it's something that only God can do in us. That means we have to entrust ourselves to that mysterious and wonderful power of love that

surrounds us all; it means we have to trust God to do that wonderful, unimaginable work of new life." (*The Waking Dreamer*)

Entrust ourselves to that mysterious and wonderful power of love. And because we have been loved so mysteriously and powerfully, we can love with that same mystery and power. We have been loved. Paul's words don't make it so. We have been loved. The words testify to that love, tell the story of that love.

To read these words, to let them cascade over us, to let them be grounded and take root in us, is to, in a sense, take an oath, a pledge, a vow. This is our core vision. Love. And we make the vow and take the oath, not because of the love we can manufacture on our own, but because of the love that has been planted deep within us. It blooms and flourishes. That is the oath made to us, the vow, the promise. That we are loved. And that becomes, therefore, the oath we make, the vow, the promise. That loved, we love.

Charles Cousar writes that in this prayer of Paul's, the gifts of love are not private, but have a "deeply corporate significance." (*Texts for Preaching, Year A, page 445*)

That's so often the mistake of religion in America; we have been taught to think that salvation is about the individual, a personal relationship with God. The "you" Paul writes to is a plural you – us – and beyond us, so that the love we experience is never private, but is to be shared in community and not simply the community that comprises the church.

So it can never be a sense of self-satisfaction that God loves us as individuals because of who we are. It can always be a sense of gratitude that God loves us as individuals because of who God is, and that God loves us individually, but never in isolation, always loving us into community so that we can become a beloved community that loves a broken and hurting world.

That is our vow, our pledge, our oath. To love.

To love as parents and children, partners and spouses. To love as friends. To love in our work – love that respects and seeks justice and equity, whether we are lawyers or teachers or maintenance people or football coaches or swimmers. Love as neighbors. Love as citizens. Love that honors the other, that seeks reconciliation, that builds community. Love in abundance, in a world filled with anxiety and fear and a commitment to the myth of scarcity.

We may not get any medals for it. In fact, we probably won't. But if we seek to live by this vision, that "they'll know we are Christians by our love," medals won't matter. Love will win. Amen.