

What a Waste?

October 19, 2008

Easter Sunday

Recently, I had the chance to go to the Colts-Jaguar game at Lucas Oil Stadium with my nephew and his wife, who happen to live in Jacksonville and who are avid Jag fans. Losing the game in the very last seconds was disappointing, to say the least, and even a bit harder given their presence.

However, since that experience, I have been thinking about what that might be like for the players, and actually for any athlete who prepares hard, plays his or her very best, and still loses. What might that be like? And, even though it's really only a game, is the winning or losing all that matters? Because they lost, was all their preparation a gigantic waste of time?

Now this topic came to our message team in the wake of the Beijing Olympics in August. Many of us watched with great interest the triumphs of Michael Phelps and his 8-Gold Medal wins in swimming, and probably many of us heard of the hard work he had put in to be able to achieve what he did during the competition. I suppose we all realize just how much dedication and effort it takes for anyone to achieve such a thing.

The reality is that probably every one of the participants who marched in the Parade of Athletes during Opening Ceremonies had worked just as hard and just as long, but very, very few of them ever stood on the winner's platform wearing a medal. In fact, for the vast majority of those in Beijing, the parade was their best and only moment to shine, because most of them stood absolutely no chance of winning. Was all their effort to get there a waste of time and energy?

And then there's the saga of Cathedral High School student and gymnast Samantha Peszek. She, too, had prepared long and hard, hoping to earn a spot on the team, dreaming of being a Gold Medalist at the Games. After all the time, energy, money and effort she and her family had expended for her to have this opportunity, she sprained her ankle while practicing just before the competition began in China. As I recall, she was able to compete in one event, and she did stand on the platform when the women won the team's silver medal. But what about all that hard work? Was it a waste of time?

You know, this whole phenomena isn't just about athletes; it really applies to all of us. We set our sights on some desired goal, and we work hard, only to fail short in our efforts. Or we practice and practice and practice to perfect a skill only to have someone who's a little bit better defeat us. Is there any benefit to be derived when we work so hard, try so hard, and wind up disappointed?

I think the answer is "yes," because for most of us, this is the continuing story of our lives. For the Olympians who got there, but who were injured and

didn't compete, or who tried and lost, I'm hopeful there's the sense of satisfaction for getting there, and a sense of gratitude for having had the chance to live what for many was a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Just to be in another part of the world had to be an eye-opening opportunity, and my personal experience tells me that once our world has been expanded, it can never again shrink, and I would hope that every Olympian's horizons have been greatly expanded by their experience. Just by being in another part of the world, we begin to understand that we're only one part of a global community that's rich in diversity. We begin to understand that not everyone in the world lives the way we do, or experiences life as we do. I think we develop deeper respect and higher regard for all the cultures that come together to make up our world.

"Sure," you might say, "they got a nice trip and got to experience another part of the globe, but what about all the time and effort they put in to get there? What about that?"

In my view, that is the biggest gift they received, and the most significant one any of us can ever receive. As much as many of us tend to focus on the winning and losing side of things, the real meaning comes in the process of getting there rather than in the arriving. I guess the best way I can say it is this: "It's not really about the destination; it's all about the journey," or as the late songwriter Harry Chapin put it: "It's got to be the going, not the getting there that's good."

What did he mean by that? I really believe that it's not so much whether we come in first or last, or whether we succeed or fail, it has to do with what we learned, how dedicated we were, how self-disciplined we became along the way. What kind of healthy habits have we developed? What are the attributes and characteristics that have matured within us as a result of our work and effort? What of lasting significance would we have missed were it not for the work we have put in? Therein lies the reward, the benefit, the worth.

The reality is that everyone of us will experience disappointments in life. There will be goals we set that we will not reach; there will be hopes and dreams that will not be realized. We will all take some risks and fail. Nonetheless, I believe the gains we make in the process of moving toward our dream far outweigh the shortfall, and actually combine to make us better, stronger people living enriched lives.

I think that's one way in which we could understand the Bible passage we have this morning. The writer is thought to be Paul, and our version from The Message puts it like this: "We pray that you'll have the strength to stick it out over the long haul—not the grim strength of gritting your teeth, but the glory-strength God gives. It is strength that endures the unendurable and spills over into joy, thanking God who makes us strong enough to take part in everything bright and beautiful..."

In order to "stick it out over the long haul" with what the Bible passage calls "glory-strength," we have to be willing to be disciplined and engage in some hard work, knowing full well there's no guarantee of the

“success” we dream of at the end, and all the while realizing the gains we’re making as we move along the road.

It’s like a story that has been told about the golfer Gary Player. He won more international golf tournaments in his day than anyone else, and throughout his career, people often said to him, “I’d give anything if I could hit the golf ball like you.”

On one particularly tough day, Player was tired and frustrated, when once again, he heard those words—“I’d give anything if I could hit the golf ball like you.” His usual politeness failed him at that moment, and he tersely replied to the spectator, “No you wouldn’t. You’d give anything to hit a golf ball like me *if it was easy*. Do you know what you’ve got to do to hit a golf ball like me? You’ve got to get up at 5:00 every morning, go out on the course, and hit a 1000 golf balls. Your hand starts bleeding and you walk up to the clubhouse, wash the blood off your hand, slap a bandage on it, and go out and hit another 1000 golf balls. That’s what it takes to hit a golf ball like me.”

Gary Player was determined; he was persistent; he didn’t quit; he was disciplined and he worked hard. Each one of us could benefit by learning from Gary Player and others like him. We all need to understand that anything we value requires hard work, be that our business, our family, our relationships, our personal well-being, our faith, our friendships. Anything that really matters needs our attention and hard work.

And why is that so? Because it is what we become in the process that really counts, and that has to do with the habits we establish on the way. Like with those Olympic athletes, we all benefit when we develop positive, life-giving habits. Dr. Ron Jensen, in his book *Make a Life, Not Just a Living*, says, “**Habits are a combination of three things: desire, knowledge, and skill. Desire is why we do what we do. Knowledge is knowing what to do. Skill is how we do it. Together they establish our habits.**” Developing good habits as we grow our way into life is essential for the journey to be meaningful and fulfilling.

All in all, it seems to me that what we’re talking about this morning are the characteristics that set people like Samantha Peszek, Michael Phelps and Gary Player apart from the rest of us. However, it doesn’t have to be that way, because every single one of us is capable of giving as much of ourselves to the journey as they have done. It’s just a matter of actually doing it.

I clipped an article out of a magazine that was about “people of influence” and what tends to set them apart from others of us. It seems to me that these attributes might be worthy of our consideration this morning. The first characteristic that was named was **passion**, defined as “**the burden that compels one to act.**”

It seems to me that another way to describe passion is by using the word purpose. Whatever we call it, it is the fuel that ignites the fires of our lives and gives us the motivation to act. Passion/purpose is the attribute that causes people to rise to the top of business, sports, academia, science, politics..well, to the top of virtually

any endeavor. Passion is the fuel that ignites the fires of our lives and set us ablaze, and it comes from God. Henry Ward Beecher, the 19th century theologian once said, “The strength of a person consists in finding out the way God is going and going that way.” When the way God is moving and the way we are moving coincide, that’s where we find the passion.

Yet another key characteristic is one we have already talked about—preparation. It’s all about doing the pre-work to be ready when the opportunity presents itself. That’s one of the primary reasons the gift of life is in the journey, because it’s on the journey that we’re in the midst of preparing ourselves for whatever comes next. We might all want to adopt something Abraham Lincoln said as our own: “**I want to live in such a way that when I am called, I’m ready.**” I hope we all do.

Living life on purpose means that we have to do a little sorting out. In short, we have to be clear on our priorities. What really does matter to us? What counts? What are the essentials, and what’s extra, but non-essential? As we walk along this journey of life, it’s always about sorting out what’s important, and what’s not.

And there’s yet another characteristic that’s valuable if we are fully engaged in the process of making a life, and that’s persistence. It’s all about sticking it out, hanging in there, refusing to quit. It’s that “glory-strength” that our Bible passage talks about: the will to keep going, the dedication to the effort. To keep on keeping on means that we have to have an unwavering belief in what we’re doing, knowing that there will be setbacks and roadblocks.

For those Olympians, for any athlete, for us—those are the things we gain as we move along this journey of life: we discover our passion and purpose for being; we are willing to do the hard work to prepare ourselves along the way; we keep our lives streamlined, living by what we believe to be important; we develop the kind of healthy habits that enrich our lives and the lives of others; and we keep at it, believing in what we’re about.

If we live our lives by these principles, our lives will be meaningful and worthwhile. It’s all about the journey. Are we willing to make it?

Closing:

As we leave here this morning, let’s remember the words of Harry Chapin: “**It’s got to be the going, not the getting there that’s good.**” I hope and pray that our “going” is making life worthwhile.

Have a good Sunday and go in peace. Amen.

