

## God's "Can-Do" People

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Jo Lynn and I aren't always on the same page when it comes to sports; but we both enjoy watching the Olympics—summer and winter. Next August the summer Olympics will be held in Rio de Janeiro, and already there is a long "weeding-out" process under way. Those who are in it just for the trip to Rio will be very quickly "weeded out" from those who were really committed.

Jo Lynn and I have a personal interest in the next couple of Olympics, because Claire Adams, 17-year-old high school student who holds several national titles in the backstroke and who recently finished fifth in the world swimming championships held in Singapore, is the daughter of Todd Adams, Deputy General Minister of the Christian Church and Interim President of the Disciples Historical Society. Todd was a leader the district youth program in northeast Oklahoma when we served as district youth sponsors in the late 70s and early 80s.

We're very proud of Todd and of Claire, and hope to see her an Olympic champion, if not next summer, then certainly in 2020.

The writer of Hebrews describes what amounts to a "weeding-out" process in the life of faith, a process that's similar to the one that precedes each Olympiad; in fact he uses the language of athletics:

<p>(HEBREWS 12:1-3 NIV) <i>Therefore, since we are surrounded by such a great cloud of witnesses, let us throw off everything that hinders and the sin that so easily entangles, and let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us.<sup>2</sup> Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our</i></p>	<p><i>faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.<sup>3</sup> Consider him who endured such opposition from sinful men, so that you will not grow weary and lose heart.</i></p>
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*"...let us run with perseverance the race marked out for us. Let us fix our eyes on Jesus, the author and perfecter of our faith, who for the joy set before him endured the cross..."*

"Endured the cross" ... You know, I really don't know if this text has any message for us today. The things we "endure" don't all line up with what they endured. Some of us endure poor health, or the aches that come with the years; some of us endure the passing anguish of grief—or of watching a loved one suffer; but those things are experienced by every human, and they're temporary—they, too will pass. Much of what we "endure" is from our own hand.

There's no occupation army roaming our streets; no storm troopers or midnight knocks on our door—as in the days when the letter to the Hebrews was written. There's no official policy of religious persecution; no threat of death for being a Christian; and if there were, would there be enough evidence to convict many of us? There's no poverty or starvation among us. The poorest of us—the poorest of us—lives better than 90% of the population of the rest of the world.

So, what Word might our text have for us today? What is "the race that is set before us?"

During every Olympiad as one athlete after another is interviewed, a common theme keeps emerging: they talk about vision; they talk about goals, dedication, perseverance, and discipline.

We hear a great deal today about motivation, goal-setting, and developing a game plan. Most of it's helpful. And we all know that getting off to a good start is important; no doubt about it.

But what we don't hear much about is finishing well; sticking with something until it's done; hanging tough when the excitement wears thin, and the crowd goes home and the fun fades; being just as committed eight minutes into the fourth quarter as at the kickoff—when all that keeps us going is discipline and commitment and guts.

Today is the 15<sup>th</sup> of our "52 Days of Discernment". Each week we focus on rebuilding one aspect of our faith and witness. Two weeks ago we focused on rebuilding our confidence that we can hear and respond to God's voice. Last week our focus was on rebuilding our sense of trust: "with God, nothing is impossible. Today we are rebuilding our strength—our perseverance.

Our inspiration comes from the story of Nehemiah rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem after the Babylonians had destroyed the city and Solomon's Temple and had carried away the leaders, the scholars, the artisans and the young and strong—led them away in chains. And now, 200 years later Nehemiah has come to rebuild the city walls.

Nehemiah faced the grossest of hardships: working with people whose homes were built on top of that pile of rubble that once had been the magnificent "City of David." Most of them had never experienced life from any other perspective than poverty, being put down and humiliated by the few who had become rich and powerful and now lorded it over them: charging them outrageous interest on loans, paying them starvation wages and demanding oppressive workloads and schedules.

And on top of that were the neighboring tribes of Bedouins who harassed them daily: stealing from them, raiding their neighborhoods and destroying their homes, kidnapping, raping, enslaving... The people were discouraged and beaten down. They knew nothing about discipline or commitment or perseverance.

But, Nehemiah had a vision and a passion: "Let's rebuild the walls so our people can be safe." He confronted the loan sharks and the corrupt leaders and priests; but his highest priority was to restore a sense of security to the people.

And so he rallied the people. He organized them and shared the vision and continually encouraged them and called them to higher levels of commitment and dedication and perseverance.

We know about that kind of perseverance. It's the kind upon which this country was built. It's the way most important things get done. Can you imagine the effect if that kind of dedication and determination were neglected? How many skyscrapers would sit unfinished? How many patients would die on the operating table? How many Olympic records would be broken? How many academic degrees and honors earned? How many cars repaired? Books written—or read? Crops grown? Symphonies composed? Teeth straightened? How many churches would be closed?

Every achievement worth remembering is stained with the blood, sweat and tears of perseverance, and scarred by the wounds of disappointment. To quit, to run, to hide, to escape—none of these options solve anything. They only postpone the acceptance of, and the reckoning with, reality.

Hebrews says, ***“Let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us.”***

What if the race that is set before us is not about “enduring” hardships? What if it's about vision. What if the “race marked out for us is about discovering, developing and delivering our gifts of ministry toward fulfilling our calling as People of God. What if it's about being faithful stewards of time, talent and treasure? What if it's about deciding and committing to bring about that day for which we pray: “Thy Kingdom come, Thy will be done on earth as it is in heaven.”

Nehemiah's vision of rebuilding the walls of Jerusalem was huge. It had been avoided for 150 years—since the first wave of Israelites returned from Babylonian exile. And when Nehemiah began the task there were obstacles everywhere.

Today's text is from Nehemiah 2:19-20. Sanballat and Tobiah and Geshem are Sheiks of the three primary Bedouin Tribes that continually harassed the Israelites:

***But when Sanballat the Horonite and Tobiah the Ammonite official, and Geshem the Arab heard of it, they mocked and ridiculed us, saying, “What is this that you are doing? Are you rebelling against the king?”<sup>20</sup> Then I replied to them, “We are servants of the God who rules from heaven, and he will make our work succeed.”***

Nehemiah answered: “We are servants of the God who rules from heaven, and he will make our work succeed.”

When the world says, “You can't do it,” God's 'Can-Do' people answer: “We are servants of the God who rules from heaven, and he will make our work succeed.”

Today, the issue for us may not be, “If you're suffering and enduring, 'Look to Jesus'”; although when we are suffering and enduring that's always the best counsel we can give. Today, when we consider the race that is set before us I pray our response is: “Because we have so many resources, so many blessings, so many gifts of service, let us set our goals high, because we already have 'Looked to Jesus'.”

Just remember, being God's “Can-Do” people always takes perseverance. The only time our Lord used the word “easy” was in reference to a yoke.