

Hebrews 11:29-12:2

By faith the people passed through the Red Sea as if it were dry land, but when the Egyptians attempted to do so they were drowned. By faith the walls of Jericho fell after they had been encircled for seven days. By faith Rahab the prostitute did not perish with those who were disobedient, because she had received the spies in peace.

And what more should I say? For time would fail me to tell of Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, of David and Samuel and the prophets-- who through faith conquered kingdoms, administered justice, obtained promises, shut the mouths of lions, quenched raging fire, escaped the edge of the sword, won strength out of weakness, became mighty in war, put foreign armies to flight. Women received their dead by resurrection. Others were tortured, refusing to accept release, in order to obtain a better resurrection. Others suffered mocking and flogging, and even chains and imprisonment. They were stoned to death, they were sawn in two, they were killed by the sword; they went about in skins of sheep and goats, destitute, persecuted, tormented-- of whom the world was not worthy. They wandered in deserts and mountains, and in caves and holes in the ground.

Yet all these, though they were commended for their faith, did not receive what was promised, since God had provided something better so that they would not, apart from us, be made perfect.

Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.

Have you all been watching the Olympics? As you would probably guess, I have been watching the swimming. No surprise, right? I mean, the number of hours Jane and I have spent at the pool watching Matthew and others swim, is beyond counting. I can remember at the Colorado state finals Matthew's senior year. He did pretty good. He took second in the 100 fly. But what was also amazing to watch was Missy Franklin just dominate the pool. Her club team and Matthew's swam against each other. I like watching competitive swimming because I know just how hard it is.

So it has been great to watch USA Swimming do so well in the pool in Rio. Ledesky with three golds and being the first swimmer to win gold in the 200, 400, and 800 free in a single Olympics.

Murphy and DiRado, who took gold in the men's and women's backstroke, respectively. And Simone Manuel who became the first black woman to win an Olympic gold in swimming. I loved her surprised look on her face and how she thanked God so vocally after her win. I'm starting to sound like an NBC Sports commentator! But it has been really so much fun to watch.

And what about Phelps? Man, what about Phelps? This is his 5th Olympics. He didn't win any medals at his first, but since then it has been the Michael Phelps show. In the Olympics he has swum in 29 finals and won gold in 23 of them. 28 total medals. He personally has won more medals than 108 of the participating countries have. He has held 39 world records, often just beating his old record. He broke his first world record when he was just 15 years old. You don't want to know what I was doing at 15. Neither did my mom.

This year he broke a record that has stood for 2,168 years. It was a record that was set by Leonides of Rhodes and it was set before Jesus was born. I'm sounding like a commentator again, aren't I? Ok, let me take my sports commentator hat off and put my collar back on.

There is something new for Phelps at this Olympics. I don't know if you have noticed it, or not, but it is very obvious. He talks about it all the time. He's happy! In almost every interview he has given during this Olympics, and I admit that I haven't seen them all, but in everyone that I have seen, Phelps talks about how happy he is. Now, you might say, "Of course he's happy. He is winning every race that he competes in. I would be happy too, if I was the most decorated Olympian in the history of all Olympians, and had a net worth of \$55 million dollars."

You might say that you would be happy too, if you had a beautiful fiancé and a wonderful new son. But I don't think his happiness is primarily about any of those things. I think those things, the baby and the beautiful fiancé, even the money or the new opportunity for money from this Olympics, are more the results of his happiness, not the cause.

Did you know that two years ago, this man, with all the records set and all the medals that he had won at previous Olympics, was on the verge of suicide? I mean, how could that be? That's not how we are told it is supposed to work.

He drank constantly to drown out his sorrow. He was arrested for DUI (not his first time). All his life, with his extra-long arms and his flipper like feet people have been telling him that HE is the greatest athlete in history. "You're the one Michael! Just keep producing and you can keep being the one." And he did produce. He trained. He prepared. He pushed himself. And he won.

But then he retired, supposedly, and after a while the phone stopped ringing so much. ESPN was calling Ryan Lochte or Missy Franklin or Katie Ledecky. He would tell you that he felt that he had no purpose in life. That is just what he told ESPN. He

said, "I was a train wreck. I was like a time bomb, waiting to go off. I had no self-esteem, no self-worth. It was not good. I felt lost." No self-esteem? No self-worth? Lost? How could those words be used by the most successful Olympian in history?

But here we are in Rio where, even before his five new golds, as of last night, and a new silver, he was feeling a joy that had eluded him all of his life. What could make that happen? What changed in just 23 months?

Well, here is what Phelps would probably tell you, if you were hanging out in the backyard around the bar-b-que some summer evening with no cameras and no microphones. In 2014 he was holed up in his house drinking himself blind, contemplating suicide, and reeling from a DUI conviction. At that time a friend of his, Ray Lewis of the Baltimore Ravens, came to Phelps and told him, "This is where we fight! This is when real character shows up. Don't shut down. If you shut down, we all lose." Then, as he helped convince Phelps to go into rehab, he gave him a book to read. The book that he placed in his hands that day was *A Purpose Driven Life* by Pastor Rick Warren.

Two weeks into his stay at The Meadows in Phoenix, Phelps called Lewis and reportedly said, "Man, this book is crazy! (He meant that in a good way). The thing that's going on...oh my God!...my brain! I can't thank you freaking enough, man! You saved my life!"

Talking again later to ESPN, Phelps recently said that Warren's book, "turned me into believing there is a power greater than myself and there is a purpose for me on this planet."

There's a power greater than myself and a purpose for me on this planet. Can you imagine that? Can you imagine that that was news to him; that he had never really heard about any of that stuff?

The reason, I think, that Phelps is happy, even joyful, today is because he has found a new way. He is running a new race. Sure, he is still an athlete, an Olympic athlete, the most successful ever, but now he is participating in something that makes the Olympics into a proper perspective.

God placed faithful people into his life. Rick Warren, Ray Lewis, and others who have shown Michael Phelps just how truly important he is...to God. And how really important he can be...for God.

Here again is what we heard this morning. "Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God."

That is what we heard from Hebrews this morning. They had been surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses, so that they could find the joy and become witnesses themselves.

They were, and we are, witnesses not just to words in a book, but to a truth for the world. They were, and we are, witnesses not just through an achieving, even record setting, life, but to a transformed life that invites others into that same amazing, truly powerful existence. They were, and we are, witnesses not just to stand on platforms and stages to receive medals and accolades, but to walk in the world to share the joy as best as they are able.

What race are we running here at Redeemer? What race are you running in your life? What witness are we proclaiming for those who will come after us?

One race eventually leads to retirement and maybe even, given time, obscurity. The other leads to reaching forward and touching future generations with a joy that they would not even imagine without us because it is one that the world will not teach them.

The world is sitting in its room, distracting itself with so many trivial and damaging things, trying to hide the fact that it is on the verge of suicide because it has lost its purpose.

This is the time for people of faith to show up because, if we don't, we all lose.

Amen