

In the first few chapters of his book, Crazy Christians, Michael Curry points out that Scripture records how God repeatedly asks particular individuals to do the impossible. Abraham and Sarah are asked to move and become the ancestors of a great nation. Siblings Moses, Aaron and Miriam lead a people out of slavery into the promised land. Jesus sends the disciples out two by two to share the Good News to all the corners of the earth. In each case, the individuals feel inadequate to the task, and each were reassured that the task was achievable because God was with them. Perhaps Henry Ford captures the ability to fulfill God's request in this memorable quote: "Whether you think you can or think you can't, you're right!" When you think you can, you realize that you are part of being something larger than yourselves.

The Olympics are a wonderful reminder that we are part of something larger than ourselves. By definition, an Olympian is special - extraordinary even, because of his or her ability to compete on an international level. Yet we ordinary mortals can feel apart of these magnificent games. While our athletic abilities may be limited to channel surfing, we each know that moment when our chest fills with pride as our national anthem is played because an American - one of us - has won the gold medal. Closer to

home, we are thrilled by the achievements of Katie Ledecky and Michael Phelps who practically grew up in our backyard. Katie and Michael are among those who thought they can, and through years of hard work and sacrifice they have achieved their dreams.

Of course, being part of something larger than ourselves is not always a positive experience. Think of our collective horror on September 11th, 2001 or earlier this summer with the attack in France as they celebrated Bastille Day. Think of the residents of Aleppo, Syria caught in the struggle between the Syrian government and those who would overthrow Assad's regime. Jeremiah was a very young man also caught up in the larger events of his time. Babylon has overthrown the land of Judah and then later, Jerusalem. The city is in ruins. God's chosen people are in disarray. The monarchy has strayed from the covenant established by God and Moses.¹ In this situation, God has chosen Jeremiah to speak to his people. Over the next few weeks, we will hear Jeremiah call his people to repentance, declare God's judgment, lament over their painful situation and finally bring hope and renewal to a despairing people.²

¹ Leo G. Perdue, revised by Robert R. Wilson, "Jeremiah Introduction," New Revised Standard Version, The Harper Collins Study Bible, (Harper One: San Francisco) 1998, 998-1001.

² Richard W. Nysse, Alt 1st Reading, Commentary on Jeremiah 1:4-10, www.workingpreacher.org

Jeremiah will tell his people painful truths, that straying from God's precepts will inevitably lead to plucking up and pulling down, to destruction and being overthrown and heeding God's word will allow the kingdom to build up and to plant.

While we often hear this passage from Jeremiah at sacramental occasions such as baptism or confirmation or ordination, in the context of Jeremiah's entire book we should be aware that we are called to LISTEN to Jeremiah.³ Although our context is different from that of Jeremiah, a prudent Jew or Christian becomes mindful of just what God expects from us. Our Gospel passage gives us a clue.

Within this story is a tension between rigid adherence to the Law and grace. The leader of the synagogue comes across as heartless, enforcing the letter of the law rather than the spirit. Yet does the extension of God's grace constitute work? Jesus doesn't think so and therefore, no commandment has been violated. The woman who could not stand upright did not initiate contact with Jesus, nor did she ask for anything from him. God's grace freely came to her through the person of Jesus. Jesus frees her from her affliction and by touching her, someone ritually unclean, he

³ Ibid.

restores her to her community of faith. As the agent of God's grace, Jesus is unconcerned about redeeming the wounded and marginalized.⁴

In extending God's grace, what was God's purpose? Imagine having to navigate the world bent in half. Your ability to reach something is limited. Your ability to see what's ahead of you is very limited. You can't even see properly someone talking to you. God's purpose is to free this faithful "daughter of Abraham" from all that restricts her. God's purpose for us by extension is to "heal, liberate, and unbind" us from all that would keep us from God's love for us or our neighbor's love for us. In this way God leads us ever more deeply into fellowship with one another.⁵

We all experience wounds of some type. We are all bound by conventions and common understandings that blind us to reality. These conventions lead us to "I can't" conclusions. For example, have you heard the convention that black people can't swim? And if they can, they certainly aren't gifted at it because their physiology works against them. Turns out that's wrong. Reality is that for many black people, access to swimming pools or other bodies of water were not made available to them. Simone

⁴ Rodney S. Sadler, Jr. "Exegetical Perspective," *Feasting on the Word, Year C, Volume 3*, (Westminster John Knox Press: Louisville KY) 2010, 385.

⁵ David Schnasa Jacobsen, "Gospel Perspective" Luke 13:10-17 www.workingpreacher.org

Manuel freed us from comfortable lies and revealed the truth with her two gold and two silver medals at the Rio Olympics.

Finding out what limits us or blinds us or keeps us from walking where God would have us go takes some work. Participating in something larger than ourselves, that might take more than a lifetime to fulfill, takes courage, dedication and hard work. A few weeks ago, Trish Kocka, Leigh McCarthy and I attended a diocesan workshop on stewardship. We were asked to dream about what we would do with 25% more money in our budget that would make Jesus respond “WOW!” The workshop participants got pretty excited about the possibilities. Aligning our dreams with God’s dreams for us made us think “we can!” We can physically expand our food pantry space, we can assist neighborhood families with the new Common Core curriculum, we can grow this church into more disciples for Christ, we can share this wonderful, life giving Good News, we can be the Episcopal Church in Southern Maryland in ways unseen before. If there’s one thing I’ve learned this last year at Ascension, is that we are a parish that can. Where do you dream we might go? What excites you about our possibilities? Knowing that God is with us, what grace is being

extended to us and where will we in turn extend that grace. I look forward to finding out with you.

Amen.