

September 5, 2021

Texts: Isaiah 35: 4-7a; Mark 7: 31-37

Title: "Giving Our Best"

Some of you will remember the name Cathy Rigby. She became famous as an Olympic gymnast who went on to become an actress. You may not remember her as an actress, but she starred in a production of *Peter Pan* which was nominated for a Tony Award for Best Revival of a Musical. Before that, however, she was the most popular gymnast of her time. She competed in the 1972 Summer Olympics but was hampered by an injury. It seems that, prior to the Games, she had been working on a "front aerial walkover"—a balance-beam skill that was quite risky for the time—but, because she was injured, she didn't attempt this move during the Olympics, and as a result, she didn't win a medal.

Before the games began, she prayed for strength to move through her routine without making a mistake. And she did perform well, but she didn't win. Emotionally, she was crushed. She joined her parents in the stands, ready for a good cry. "I'm sorry," she said, "I did my best." Her wise mother responded with words she would never forget. "Doing your best," said her mother, "is more important than being the best."

Those are words many of us need to remember: "Doing your best is more important than being the best." In any field of endeavor only one fortunate person can **be** the best, but every one of us can **do our** best.

In our reading from the Gospel of Mark, after Jesus had taught and healed and cast out demons, the people said about him, "He has done everything well." *He*

has done everything well,” And I have to ask myself, “Can others say that about me?” I claim to be a follower of Christ. And not just a follower—I claim to have the spirit of Jesus Christ living in me. So, when people look at my life, or your life, are they inspired to say, “He (or she) has done everything well?”

How do you get there? What is required? And who do you look to as an example of excellence in all areas of life? Chances are that person is somebody who knows what it is to give their very best.

For one thing, giving your best means a radical commitment to doing the very best you know in everything you do. You’ve probably seen the series of books entitled, *God’s Little Devotional Boo*. In one of them there’s a story about Jack Katz, a large lineman during the early 1960s on the University of Florida football team. The team was in a practice session, running wind sprints for conditioning. Katz had proven himself to be the fastest lineman on the team, but he wanted to be the very best he could be.

So Katz went to his coach and asked if he might be allowed to run sprints with the faster and smaller running backs. The coach was probably amused at his request, but permission was granted. For the next several days, Katz managed to finish last in every race with the backs. No shock there. So the coach went to Katz to ask if he wouldn’t rather go back to running with the other linemen than lose every race against the running backs. Katz responded. “I’m not out here to outrun the linemen. I already know I can do that. I’m here to learn how to run faster and if you’ve noticed. I’m losing by a little less every day.” Giving your best means a

radical commitment to doing the very best you know. Of course, course we're not all into sports.

So let's think about our commitment to Christ. You and I don't come to faith on the basis of how much we do. We aren't needing to work ourselves to death. Still I wonder if we will not someday stand before the good Lord and be asked that most terrifying of all questions, "Did you do your best?" I'm referring to level of commitment not level of perfection by the way.

Nevertheless, the call to follow Christ is a call to be the very best that we can be. In his recent book, journalist David Brooks notes that most people cultivate two sets of virtues, one he calls our résumé virtues and the other he calls our eulogy virtues. He writes, "The résumé virtues are the skills you bring to the marketplace." In other words, the virtues that you list on a résumé. The eulogy virtues are the ones that are talked about at your funeral—whether you were kind, courageous, honest or faithful. How you treated your family and friends. Were you capable of authentic love?

"We all know that the eulogy virtues are more important than the résumé ones," writes David Brooks, but our culture and our educational systems spend more time teaching the skills and strategies you need for career success than the qualities you need to radiate that sort of inner light. Many of us are clearer on how to build an external career than on how to build inner character."

What would a goal to give our best look like? To become totally committed to love our community? To be the most generous people around?

To put it simply but directly, following Christ is modeling ourselves after him. What would Jesus do? How would Jesus approach the needs and challenges of our neighborhood? Of our family? How would He rearrange our priorities or our schedule? People were drawn to Jesus. They were inspired by him. His character, his priorities and his goals revolved around doing the will of God and revealing God's heart to the world. He lived well, he taught well, he died well. Beyond that, he rose triumphantly and lives forever. He is our model. He is the one who calls us to set lofty goals, to seek after excellence in every area of our lives and who is with us as we seek to go beyond the mere of a token commitment that is often seen today.

When the Lord asks, "Did you do your best?" how will you answer? Again, we are not Jesus, but if his Spirit lives within us, we will be enabled to give more than we ever thought possible. He can help. He will help if that is our desire. Amen.