



THE UNITED CHURCH OF CANADA

CANADIAN MEMORIAL CHURCH
& CENTRE FOR PEACE

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Luke 13:31-32

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Second Sunday in Lent

“Own the Podium”

The Lord is my Light and my salvation. So many songs have been written about opening ourselves up to the Light of the Lord and allowing ourselves to be a vessel for this Light into the world. We are often asked by Spirit to stand boldly, to shine our light, to share our gifts, and yet we shy away from this call. We often dismiss a compliment or a challenge, and find ways of playing small or discounting our achievements. We believe someone or something is against and back down, hide, or believe we have to “fight” to win.

Nothing and No One is Against Us

Last week I attended a conference in Denver. A man named Gary Simmons who does training and consulting in the area of Integral church leadership facilitated 3 workshops. The one of the major themes throughout his presentations was:

What would life be like if we believed: Nothing and no one is against us.

What if we could live like that? – as Jesus did when he answered the Pharisees warnings in the reading Natalie read? He said: I have work to do. I can't worry about Herod coming after me. It's not my time. I have to heal a few more, cast out a few more demons. I'll be on my way for now. I can't be bothered with fearing or fighting others.

What are the podiums of our lives that we either shy away from or fight to dominate and then feel ashamed when we slightly miss the mark? What are the inner enemies of doubt and fear that come before us? What are the stories we tell ourselves about the competition, the enemy, those against us and those not for us? OR - How do we live confidently – remembering that the Kin-dom of God is within us, always, and this Kin-dom will never forsake me.

Owning the Podium

Perusing the paper of several articles – I kept coming across the phrase “Own the Podium.” Early on in the Olympics it was referred to with shame – since the appearance was that Canada was NOT owning the podium. (Now that has changed drastically in the 2nd week, but it was a haunting goal early on in the games.) A number of athletes last week were apologizing and expressing shame to have let their country down by not winning the Gold. The fact that they had won the silver or bronze was inconsequential, needless to say that they had qualified to be an Olympic athlete at all. After all, there had been resources and lots of money and backing and technology and training that had been provided to them to guarantee that they would “own the podium.”

I have to say, I was quite offended by the inferences in the articles and the news

reports. It reminded me of the Nike campaign in 1996 Atlanta Summer Olympics that said – not casually or subliminally, but quite directly:

“You don’t win the Silver. You lose the Gold.”

Nike's use of this slogan drew harsh criticism from many sources, including several former Olympic silver and bronze medalists. I bought into the Post-modern pluralist offense to such statements. They're all winners – right? After all, they ARE the best in the world – or the best that could afford to compete in the Olympics.

How do we honour the amazing talent and excellence of ALL the athletes, and also allow for the natural hierarchy of achievement that occurs in any sporting event?

Sports in the Post-Modern Age

Soccer for the age 7 and under has changed in the U.S. The kids play, learning new skills, playing all the positions, without keeping score. A number of years ago, my nephew skipped around the backfield, picking flowers and pulling up his shorts a little higher than his parents were comfortable with. Steve and I were delightfully amused by his lack of need to “compete” and win. The rest of the spectators were not amused. They wanted Zach to be tough. To shed some blood in his defense activities. They wanted to know the score, (that was not being officially kept but was clearly being kept by quite a few of the parents).

Ok, so I know this is an extreme. But have we lost our edge in the Post-Modern world? If we can't all be winners and get a

trophy, then do we lose the drive of excellence and achievement? Or as spectators, do we find ourselves pulled between wanting to see the “kill” and just wanting everyone to get along and feel like winners? In this day and age, does *Own the Podium* become a stick or a carrot? Does it become the reward for excellence or the punishment for an achievement that is beyond so many, but just short of another? I was in a bit of a quandary on this and decided to explore the particulars of the *Own the Podium* campaign to clarify the myriad of feelings that came up for me in this.

Own the Podium - Pillars of Excellence

Like the parents of these 7 year old soccer stars, wanting to keep track of who is the “winner”, Canadians have been engaged in a 5 year campaign to “*Own the Podium.*” The focus has been on the “win” not the “play.” *Own the Podium's* corporate activities were focused on its strategic plan for five pillars of Excellence in the following areas:

National Sport Organization
Technology
Athlete and Team
Organizational
and Applied Science and Medicine

Through excellence in these five areas, and funding to support this excellence, the *Own the Podium* strategic plan was sure to be fulfilled.

Sound like the original point of the Olympics is missing a bit?

Shortly after Canadian Jenn Heil gave the performance of her life and won a silver medal in the Women’s Moguls — just a split second away from the gold winner — several sources referred to her performance and

accomplishment, not as winning a silver medal, but "as losing the gold." Reports were that she had somehow broken Canada's collective heart by not getting the gold medal, even though she had an outstanding run and was ousted from the top spot only by a "run-of-a-lifetime" effort by an American. I get it - Canadians wanted home-soil gold, but making someone feel like crap for "only" being the second best in the world doesn't seem right.

I'm used to Canada being a place where people seem to do the best job that they can, regardless of what other countries could muster up. Canadians seemed to aim for the gold but graciously accepted an individual's best effort. Now, instead of friendly competition, it's feeling like unfriendly grudge matches. The Men's Canadian hockey team is probably under the most pressure to win the gold today. Canadians call it "OUR game"; and pride themselves on having the best players, and the end result is an atmosphere of hostility against any and all challengers to the title.

Canadians decided to "try on" the American way - of Patriotism. Go Canada. Flags a-flyin, jerseys galore. This is good for country that has traditionally been understated in its nationalism. But it seems it was taken to the next step and pushed to Get the Gold or be seen as Losers. How do we let our lights shine - be proud of ourselves and our athletes, to be the brilliance that we are as Spirit shines through us - and also allow for the victory of the select few - to recognize that their expression was the highest in the games that were being played?

Spiral Journey of the Olympics

The experience of competition in the Olympics can either inspire one to elevate

one's consciousness to allow for a higher level of excellence to express, or to tumble down the spiral and activate and tribal or even individualist antagonism that awards only the few and shames those Olympians who happen to achieve their own greatness just below the threshold of Gold, let alone Silver or Bronze medals.

As we look at the Olympics, we can see the healthy (and not so healthy) interplay of consciousness occurring. There is definitely a tribal or kin-spirit consciousness at play: MY country, MY team against all other countries and teams.

Then we begin to see the Power Elite - that Might Wins. Those with the money and the resources impose their will on the athletes and the competition. Win at all costs. We saw an extreme of this play out when Donna Kerrigan was attacked and almost was not able to compete in the winter Olympics at the hands of another skaters' husband's hands.

We see the TruthForce at work, the militaristic marching of nations, orderly, with an emphasis on fairness, with an undercurrent of righteousness. We feel this honouring of tradition in the rituals of the opening and closing ceremonies, and when people refer to the old ways people used to come together in peace.

We see the StriveDrive or Achievest playing out with the corporate strategies on how to develop the best possible plan to achieve the highest results. This is the energy behind "Own the Podium." Online you can find Power Points and websites and presentations and speeches on the strategy that the whole country has followed to guarantee the success of the athletes in "owning the podium."

Then there's the Pluralist view – “they are all winners” – why do we need to have medals anyway? They should all get a trophy just for being here. And a focus on the social issues at hand. Why the homeless have not gotten the facilities promised by VANOC. And what are the international issues around human rights that often come to light during the Olympic games?

The Call of a Higher Order

The call is to a higher order. How do we acknowledge that we are all chosen? That all are the excellence of God being expressed. AND, there are those will rise to the top, who will tower over the others in their pursuits and the achievements. And we acknowledge this and celebrate this. Not out of a sense of Winner and Loser. But from a belief that as one shines their light – shares their gift, the glory of the one God is expressed.

How do we choose a higher consciousness to bring to the games of our lives? We can have our post-modern pluralist offense to “Own the Podium” (as I did earlier this week). We can move to the place of knowing that each person that steps forward in these games – is already an expression of the Most High – and there is no shame, no blame. Only an opportunity to be fully “in” - giving of oneself over to the Highest Idea of him or herself. For some this High Idea may be God that they are surrendering to, for others it might be a well-cultivated excellence, for others it giving oneself over to the zone. Whatever the higher idea is, it is a calling to be this greater idea of Spirit that wants to be revealed.

Let us remember...The skater's who's mom died who went on to skate and win the

bronze, using the energy of her loss and sadness as a catalyst for excellence. Let us remember...The athlete whose brother has Cerebral Palsy and serves as the inspiration for his achievement.

Whatever the light that has shone within – it is our chance – to see this light – in our own times of glory we might be willing to embrace our own light and shine out into the world. We must allow the conditions of the day - of competition, of our supposed “enemies”, to call us to a higher consciousness.

Going to the Mountain Top

Lent is a season of soul-searching and repentance. It is a season for reflection and taking stock. Lent originated in the very earliest days of the Church as a preparatory time for Easter. By observing the forty days of Lent, the individual Christian imitates Jesus' withdrawal into the wilderness for forty days. This time period is also a time when in years past I honoured the Season for Peace & Non-Violence – a celebration and a time of advocacy between January 30 when Gandhi was assassinated and April 4 when Martin Luther King was assassinated. We honoured the great teachers of peace – the light bearers for non-violence: Jesus, Desmond Tutu, Martin Luther King, Jr, Gandhi, Mother Theresa, Nelson Mandela.

Susan shared in Bible Study on Tuesday that the reading from Luke reminded her of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr. Each knew they were targets from many enemies, that death was a possibility each day. And yet they continued on about their work. And so they continued on. Standing tall on the podiums of their lives, never backing down from that which they were called to be and do.

In the late 50's Martin Luther King was stabbed by a woman - and if he had sneezed, based on where the knife was positioned in his chest - he would have died. In a speech he gave the night before he was assassinated, he recalled the letters he received wishing him quick recovery. The one letter that he remembered was from a girl from White Plains High School. She wrote, "I'm glad you didn't sneeze." He shared that night that he too was glad he had not sneezed - since he had lived a decade from that time and had seen much and done much.

In this same speech he went on to share that if the Lord had asked him "Of any time in history when would you like to live?" In answering the question, he scrolled through history - ancient Egypt & Greece, through the time of Moses and Jesus' time, through WWI and WWII. Strangely enough, he said, he would turn to the Almighty, and say, "If you allow me to live just a few years in the second half of the twentieth century, I will be happy."

Martin Luther King, Jr's last public words were these:

"Well, I don't know what will happen now. We've got some difficult days ahead. But it doesn't matter with me now. Because I've been to the mountaintop. And I don't mind. Like anybody, I would like to live a long life. Longevity has its place. But I'm not concerned about that now. I just want to do God's will. And He's allowed me to go up to the mountain.

And I've looked over. And I've seen the promised land. I may not get there with you. But I want you to know tonight, that we, as a people, will get to the promised land. And I'm happy, tonight. I'm not worried about anything. I'm not fearing any man. Mine eyes have seen the glory of the coming of the Lord."

Is that what Jesus meant when he told the Pharisees he'd be on his way - that he had seen the glory of the coming the Lord and he was no longer afraid of what lay before him? Is that what the writer of the Psalm meant when he wrote: I am still confident of this: I will see the goodness of the LORD in the land of the living? It this what was shown to Abraham by God, that his descendents would out-number the stars upon which he gazed?

My greatest wish, that we can live in gratitude each day, recognizing the gifts that have allowed us to be where we are today. Like Martin Luther King, Jr, to be glad we did not sneeze in the moments when it would have killed us, and to choose NOW is the greatest time to be alive.

To choose now to make a difference.

To stand tall on the podiums of our lives and glorify the God of our Being.

And for Canada - GO Canada! May the highest most part of you express this afternoon and may the glory of the Spirit of your Being express. May our tribe, the Canadians, stand behind you and with you and all the glory be to High Holy One as you define it.