

The Rev. Joanne Sanders
Stanford Memorial Church
August 22, 2004

The Spirit of Play

“O God, in the course of this busy life, give us times of refreshment and peace; and grant that we may so use our leisure to rebuild our bodies and renew our minds, that our spirits may be opened to the goodness of your creation.”

Kristin Heaston is a strength coach here at Stanford. She also happened to be the first person, in fact first woman ever, to launch a shot put on Wednesday at the Stadium of Olympia in Greece, where for the first time since 393 A.D., athletes competed at the birthplace of the Olympic Games. Kristin was “tickled to no end” because in the ancient era, women were not allowed even to watch the Games. If they were caught doing so, they were thrown off a nearby cliff. “Nobody will throw this booty off a cliff,” Heaston promised. So wrote *San Jose Mercury News* columnist Mark Purdy this week in his coverage from Athens.

While Heaston admittedly did not perform her best at these Games and unfortunately missed qualifying for the finals, Purdy reported that she left the grounds with a smile on her face. How many people get to compete on the earth where organized sport was born?

To keep this particular day as true as possible at Olympia, there were no electronic scoreboards, no big video screen for replays. Apparently, early on fans were reticent during the competition. Most were Greek, and they knew this spot was considered a national treasure. Finally, the announcer loosened them up by saying, “This is indeed a sacred site, but there is nothing wrong with cheering for the athletes.” Rhythmic clapping began and the atmosphere kicked up a notch.

Speaking of, on this particular Sabbath, I’m going to loosen up and lighten up a bit myself. ***(Remove vestment to reveal Athens/Olympic Games t-shirt and place liturgical stole over shirt – walk from pulpit to chancel below to finish sermon)***

You see, according to our gospel reading this morning, even Jesus broke with tradition on the Sabbath and healed a woman.

I confess. This is one woman who has been watching plenty of the Olympic Games this week. I love the Olympics, a little tired and bleary eyed nonetheless. And no matter how jaded we might get in the midst of Olympic doping, cost, hype, the ridiculous and redemptive quality of it all - if I asked for a show of hands about how many of us have been up late doing the same, there would be plenty I bet. There is something very compelling – still - about the Olympic games.

It might be worth mentioning that before I was ordained an Episcopal priest, I spent 10 years in the collegiate coaching ranks. I taught tennis professionally for a collective 20 years. Prior to a Master of Divinity, I obtained a Master of Science in Sports Administration. I competed as a college athlete and was extremely fortunate to play on a national championship tennis team. I was blessed with the honor of serving as part of a

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multi-religious team of chaplains in the Olympic Village at Salt Lake City in 2002. A campus colleague and I teach a course through Continuing Studies called ‘Sport and Spirituality.’

I tell you all of this not to boast or enumerate specific accomplishments, but to qualify my reason for the sermon title – **The Spirit of Play** - and my lightness of being this morning. Call it sport, athleticism, play – whatever you will – it remains a deep, deep passion and interest of mine. It is indeed a part of the fabric of my being.

However, though an enormous part of my life and experience, I will say that it can be a dangerous proposition to put sport, religion, spirituality or morality in the same arena. Overly competitive, overly commercialized excess all come to mind. High profile bad behavior and star athletes who make more money than is good for any soul can make us respond to the whole idea with blunt cynicism, if not disgust. It doesn’t take long for any of us to recall the latest story about an athlete and drug testing, given the fact that at the center of the most current professional and amateur sport drug scandal is Balco, located only minutes from here up Highway 101 in Burlingame. And yes, if what we read is true, the two Greek athletes dismissed this week from the Olympics for failing to appear for a drug test may be linked to Victor Conte and Balco.

Rather, my objective is to help us take a deep collective breath and step back this morning. To not allow us to linger in despairing critique and dismiss the world of sport altogether. Let’s be honest – there is excess and failing in every aspect of human life. This is the human condition and religious institutions know this just as well as major league baseball, the NBA, or the National Collegiate Athletic Association.

Nevertheless, at the heart of ball games, matches and riveting Olympic competition and races that energize our culture is an essential human need for play. The opening prayer for our service was selected to help us remember this.

Play, Sabbath rest, our bodies are meant to be sources of joy. Virtues before vice. They give us a reason to lighten up, and celebrate for the sake of our humanity.

There is a confessional treatise written by the philosopher Michael Novak called The Joy of Sports. Novak was having mid-life thoughts about setting his love for sports aside for more mature pursuits. He writes: “Play, not work, is the end of life. To participate in the rites of play is to dwell in the Kingdom of Ends. To participate in work, career, and the making of history is to labor in the Kingdom of Means. The modern age, the age of history, nourishes illusions. In a Protestant culture, as in Marxist cultures, work is serious, important, and adult. Its essential insignificance is overlooked. Work, of course, must be done. But we should be wise enough to distinguish necessity from reality. Play is reality. Work is diversion and escape.” In the end, Michael Novak concluded that a reverence for play was part of the goal of growing up.

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Perhaps with an eye toward reverence and growth, whether you are a sport enthusiast or sport agnostic, the current Olympic games in Greece might provide a broadening kind of diversion in our understanding of the sacredness, of the *spirit of play*.

Forgive me for being nostalgic, but of course these days I am reminded fondly of my time in Salt Lake City for the 2002 Winter Games. Yes, the temperature generally hovered around 35 F instead of Athens 95 F and it took me a great deal longer to get dressed on my way to work at the chapel in the Olympic Village. It's referred to as "layering." (This, needless to say, did not dampen my Olympic spirit at all.)

I kept a journal and posted it on our Office for Religious Life website as a way to record reflections and thoughts while at the Winter Games. Of particular note was an entry I made after a visit to the Athletes in Antiquity Exhibit at the University of Utah Library. The exhibit, on loan from the J. Paul Getty Museum in Los Angeles, reminded me that the athletic contests of the original 776 B.C. Olympic games were founded at a sanctuary dedicated to Zeus and were just one element in a religious festival. I noted that the reality of the observations from those Greek and Roman athletes of antiquity made relevant their understanding of the connection between body and spirit. That sport, competition and play for that matter, was a form of religious practice itself. And while I'm quite certain there does exist a high degree of skepticism about that perspective today, I happen to believe that is still a relevant observation.

Even in 1896, when the ancient games were first revived and held in Athens, Basil L. Gildersleeve, a professor of Greek and Latin who made it to Athens to see the end of the Games, recalled his own skepticism about the enterprise, which ultimately gave way to enthusiasm. Gildersleeve had been convinced that the sacredness associated with the original Olympics would elude the modern games. After all, the original games had in part constituted an offering to the gods. He feared that the 1896 Olympics would end up as a mere athletic contest.

"We must not forget" Gildersleeve recalled, "what it all means." "We must not forget the great altar that dominates Olympia. We must not forget that there were priests and prophets among the victors. The festival was sacred to the supreme god. The year was a sacred year; the poems that celebrated the victories were sacred poems...the athlete served God with his body."

Gildersleeve mused further by asking: "Is there anything left of the old spirit, or can anything of the old spirit be evoked? Will the new Olympic Games be anything more than athletic sports?"

Despite what we see and read amidst the phenomenal stories of these games – that is, what one news columnist referred to as "public whiners" – where anything short of

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winning a gold medal is deemed a failure and the intolerable droning noise in the background is the sound of sore losers. “Did I get mine? And if I didn’t get it, who got it instead and did they deserve it?” Yes despite the complaining – there is still a palpable sense of balance, modesty and self-possession. There is still composure, a sense of honor, despite judgment calls and fluke bounces. Said one athlete: “All the great winners, when they lost, they lost with dignity and pride. There are kids in Afghanistan who will lose their lives. If we lose, we get to go home.”

I’m of the opinion there is still something very intriguing and quite frankly – spiritual about these Games. It’s what makes a sport legacy like Martina Navratilova – at an ageless 47 – compete for her country. It’s what makes someone of her athletic stature, with 58 Grand Slam tennis titles, who has also dined in thousands of the best restaurants around the globe - stand in line with a tray in the dining hall of the Olympic Village.

There is something about this reverence for play – which I suggest is a part of all of us – that will chasten even the worst cynics who have been closed to the enormity and enthusiasm of sport, not only in our American life, but also around the world. And yet, play can take on all sorts of meaning and forms as well.

In her book, Deep Play, Diane Ackerman talks about a minister friend of hers who encourages his congregation to play because as he put it: “In play we see new possibilities, new beginnings, new colors, new avenues, and that’s what happens when we play at prayer. To play at something is to fully engage it, to have a role in something much larger than us, to be part of the script, to be part of the play, to be part of the action. When prayer becomes proper, serious, and somber,” he explained, “it loses its vitality.” He encouraged his community to sing or dance while they prayed, run, laugh while they prayed. “Play when you pray” he urged them. “Do you think God minds?”

Ackerman expounds compellingly on the difference between simple play and deep play. Simple play can take many forms and have many purposes but it goes only so far. When it starts focusing one’s life and offering ecstatic moments, it becomes deep play. Jogging because you know it’s good for you is not deep play. Playing a sport hard because a lot of money or reputation is riding on the performance is not deep play. Repeating prayers or singing hymns that have grown stale is not deep play. Deep play is not always positive and uplifting.

But there are times during deep play when one feels invincible, immortal, an ideal version of oneself. “One stands on the threshold of miracles” basketball player Patsy Neal writes about peak performances during a game. “The power of the moment adds up to a certain amount of religion in the performance. Call it a state of grace, or an act of faith, or an act of God. The individual becomes swept up in the action around her – she almost floats through her performance, drawing on forces she has never previously been aware of. In those moments of pure ecstasy one runs and jumps and lives through the pure play process, which is composed of joy and pleasure and exuberance and laughter –

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when even the pain seems completely tolerable in these precious moments of being...and knowing one is just that...a oneness and a wholeness.

Substitute gospel singing, playing a musical instrument, painting, dancing for playing basketball in Patsy Neal's description and it would be equally true.

While none of us will ever (more than likely) have the experience or opportunity of an Olympic athlete like Kristin Heaston to compete on sacred, hallowed ground such as Olympia, perhaps we will watch the Olympics differently. We might see that they remain as relevant as ever. That they continue to carry us away from our daily troubles and transport us to sacred grounds and stand on the threshold of miracles.

I will never forget my own experience in the Olympic Village in Salt Lake City. As one of the chaplains on duty the night of the Opening Ceremonies, I had a front row seat to the hundreds of athletes from all over the world, dressed in bright costume in the Village, preparing for the procession to the stadium across the bridge. As the first games after 9/11, the shock and horror of that time on our soil seemed suspended, as the example, in human form, of peaceful co-existence and goodwill among nations seemed so palpable in that moment. The commonness of our humanity was remarkably evident.

In those moments I did recognize that the Olympic games teach us that life can be a festival, that competitions can enliven entire communities. It was a clear and vivid reminder that we are a global community. And it also reminded me how an event like the Olympics continue to energize our culture and cultivate our essential human need for play.

The great but short-lived baseball commissioner Bart Giamatti once wrote:

“All play aspires to the conditions of what the ancient Persians called *pairidaeza* – paradise. It is the condition of freedom that paradise signals – and that play or sport – however hedged in by the world – wishes to mirror. Games, contests, sports reiterate the purpose of freedom every time they are enacted, the purpose being to show how to be free and to be complete and connected, unimpeded and integrated, all at once.

That is the role of leisure,” Giamatti continued, “and if leisure were a god, rather than Aristotle's version of the highest human state, sport would be a constant reminder – not a faded remnant – of that transcendent or sacred being. As our forebears did, we remind ourselves through sport of what, here on earth, is our noblest hope. Through sport, we re-create our daily portion of freedom, in public.

In whatever form it may take for you, may you resolve to recover or resurrect your own reverence for play. May you discover that the desire to excel makes winners of us all and that playing at the meaning of life is a noble thing.

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“O God, in the course of this busy life, give us times of refreshment and peace; and grant that we may so use our leisure to rebuild our bodies and renew our minds, that our spirits may be opened to the goodness of your creation.”

And let the games begin...again and again.

Amen.