

“Facing Reality”
Luke 13:31-35
March 13, 2022

The Olympic Games are always a lot of fun to watch. Even if you are not a fan of a particular sport or event; I still don't understand curling, but I found myself watching it from time to time because it is still fun to watch the athletes compete and represent their country. But perhaps the most shocking outcome of this year's winter Olympics was the fact that 3-time Olympic medalist Mikaela Shiffrin, the best Alpine skier in U.S. history, did not win any medals last month. What made her run so shocking was the fact that she did not even finish in two of her events. In her best event, the giant slalom, Mikaela crashed out on her first run after missing an early gate. This was the first time she had crashed out on this event in a span of 30 races, dating back to January 2018. In her second event, known simply as the slalom, she crashed out again and did not finish. Many journalists wrote that rarely in sports have we seen someone so great, in the peak of their prime, fail so inexplicably.

This is not how we're used to seeing the best Olympians. Usually the greatest athletes win the gold medal or at least they come close as sometimes we see another athlete beat the best by a very narrow margin. Mikaela Shiffrin was recognized around the world as the best in those two events leading up to the Olympics. She was supposed to be the American star of the 2022 Olympics. No one from the United States had ever won 3 gold medals in Alpine skiing and it was a foregone conclusion among many people that Shiffrin would become the first in the 2022 Olympic Games. But the reality is it didn't happen, and perhaps what was rather refreshing was Mikaela Shiffrin's willingness to face that reality each time through a series of interviews as she did not complain or make any excuses.

In our Gospel lesson for today we see Jesus as He continues on His journey to Jerusalem – a place where He knows He will be arrested and put to death. In fact, He’s even warned by some Pharisees that King Herod wants to kill Him. But Jesus appears to be unconcerned about any threats coming from King Herod. Instead, He focuses on the divine agenda that has already been set for Him by His Heavenly Father. There’s no self-delusion here. Jesus knows there are people who still need to be healed, He knows there are demons that need to be cast away, He knows there’s work yet to be done that’s as much a part of His mission as is His destination of Jerusalem.

But notice in our text that Jesus can’t help but indulge in a momentary daydream. Pondering in His heart the city of Jerusalem – the center of both faith and faithlessness, Jesus faces up to the reality of its makeup. In verse 34, He says of Jerusalem, “This is a city that kills the prophets and stones those who are sent to it!” Jesus demonstrated His understanding of this reality on Palm Sunday when He entered Jerusalem with people shouting, “Hosanna! Blessed is He who comes in the name of the Lord!” But at the end of the day Luke’s Gospel tells us that Jesus wept over Jerusalem. Notice in His daydream how He yearns for the people of Jerusalem as He continues by saying in verse 34, “How often would I have gathered your children together as a hen gathers her brood (her chicks) under her wings.” But Jesus knew that this dream of love would never come true as He says at the end of this verse, but “you were not willing.”

Jesus knew that the people of His day and all future people were going to fail. They were going to turn away from God and continue to live a life of sin. Therefore, the only way to save them and all of us from the punishment of sin, which God said was death – in biblical terms this meant eternal separation from God – was for Jesus to complete His mission by giving His life on the cross. In other words, we, His children, His brood or chicks, because of our sinfulness, won’t

be saved by the sheltering wing of Jesus, the hen. The only way the chicks will be saved is by the hen giving herself over to the fox (meaning Satan) in their place. That's the reality Jesus faced.

When you really think about it, I don't believe it was the nails that were pounded into His hands and feet, or the spear that was forced into His side, or even the crown of thorns that was pushed onto His head that hurt Him the most as He hung on the cross. I think it was the rejection by the people He had come to save that hurt Him more than anything.

What a wonderful image of God we see in this text – a hen gathering her chicks to protect them – for what is the cross but the love of God that is so great that He is willing to die so that His children might live? What is the cross, but the gathering of all God's children under His outstretched arms? What is the cross but God's compassion for His straying children and His longing to gather them under His arms?

Ever since the death of Christ on the cross, that compassion has been an inspiration for many people who follow Jesus. In the 1940s a young woman from England named Cicely Saunders graduated from nursing school and began working on a cancer ward in a London hospital. Gradually, she came to realize that most of the doctors ignored the patients who were deemed terminally ill, with the result being that she watched many of them die all alone, and this troubled her greatly.

She felt that Christian compassion needed to be expressed to these patients in a visible way. So she approached the hospital administration with an idea she had for surrounding those dying with cancer with friends and loved ones during their last days, rather than isolating them in sterile rooms with strangers. But her radical ideas were quickly rejected. She then decided to enroll in medical school as a way to try to make her ideas of compassionate care a reality. When she graduated in the 1950s she founded a movement that made it possible for dying patients to live their last days in a setting of love and support. Today that movement is known as Hospice,

and it drew its inspiration from Jesus' own passion and compassion for His children – “as a hen gathers her brood under her wings.”

In our Second lesson for today from Philippians, Paul says something pretty bold. He invites his readers to imitate him. The opening verse of our second lesson Paul says, “Brothers, join in imitating me...” and he goes on to tell them that if they do what they see him doing they will be what Jesus calls us to be. Can we say that? Can we tell our family members or friends, “Do what I do and you will be doing what Jesus has called all of us to do?” Are we showing the compassion of Christ to people we know or meet on a daily basis? Do we face the reality that although we are sinners and fall short of God's expectations, Jesus still loves us and cares for us?

In the 16th century the Dutch people revolted against the cruel King of Spain – King Philip. So Philip decided that he would take his army and suppress the rebellion by having his soldiers go from house to house in each city, searching for citizens who were part of the rebellion and killing them in their own homes. One night several families were hiding in the corner of a house, knowing that the soldiers would eventually come and break down the door. But then a young man had an idea. He took a goat into the house, killed it, and let some of the blood run under the door. When the soldiers reached the house and were preparing to break down the door, one soldier said, “Hold it, look, our work here is already done. See the blood coming under the door? Let's move on.” The people inside escaped death because of the blood of the goat.

Jesus willingly worked His way toward a death He didn't deserve by facing reality – heading towards Jerusalem, a word oddly enough that means, “City of Peace,” to shed His blood on the cross to give us eternal life that we do not deserve. But as Jerusalem would put God's own Son to death, it would become a city of peace since Jesus' death paid for our sins and gives us peace with God. So as His arms were stretched wide on that cross, today His arms remain wide open

as He invites us and yearns for us to come to Him. He doesn't make any fraudulent claims that life will be easy if we follow Him. He simply says, "Come, my death was sufficient for you and I want to show you how to live, so that you may experience the joy of heaven in your daily life." Now that's reality, believe it, because that's how deep His love was and still is for us.