

"Going for the Gold"

Genesis 12:1-9; Acts 20:17-24

Highlands Presbyterian Church, Columbus

April 29, 2018 – 5th Sunday of Easter – Rev. Ronald Botts

I was glad to hear last month that Ohio's newest, and largest, state park is to be named after Jesse Owens. Starting with 6,000 acres this summer, it will double in two more years, and eventually reach more than 60,000 acres spreading across parts of four counties.

Owens is a deserving namesake. His sensational high school track career in Cleveland led to being recruited by dozens of colleges. Owens chose Ohio State, even though OSU could not offer him a track scholarship. He worked a number of jobs to support himself and his wife, Ruth: as an elevator operator, a waiter, a gas station attendant, and a library worker. All of this in addition to his classes and his time at the track.

At the Big Ten Championships in 1935, he set three world records and tied a fourth, all in a span of only 45 minutes. Perhaps this is the greatest athletic feat in history and done in the shortest period of time. Underlying this record-setting explosion was the fact that he was injured from a fall and uncertain to even be able to participate that day. Jesse was clearly in pain and he had to convince his coach just to let him compete.

Jesse was selected for the American team in the 1936 Olympics, which were held in Berlin amidst the theory that the Games would show that the German people were the dominant race. Jesse had different plans, though, as he became the first American track & field athlete to win four gold medals in a single Olympiad. Owens still remains the best remembered Olympic track and field athlete because, during a time of deep-rooted segregation, he not only discredited the master race theory, but also affirmed that individual excellence, rather than race or national origin, is what distinguishes one person from another.

To be one of the best at the Olympics takes the utmost an athlete has to offer. It's hard work and grueling practice, a burning desire and total dedication, extreme exertion and willing sacrifice. You succeed only if you are willing to do everything it takes. To be an Olympic athlete you have to be skilled, committed, and also willing to take certain risks along the way. You have to "go for the gold" because it doesn't come looking for you.

In our Old Testament reading for this morning it tells of God's call to Abram to leave his country, to leave his people, and to follow in the way he will be led. It is promised that, from Abram, a great nation will arise. And as we know Abram, later renamed Abraham, became the first patriarch of Israel. He was faithful to the Lord and was willing to undertake the risks involved.

Teddy Roosevelt once said that it is far better to dare mighty things in the hope of accomplishment, even having to endure failures along the way, than to live in the gray twilight of safety. I think that's true.

Risk is to put oneself "on the line" and to do it voluntarily. It's evident in the big events of life, but also in the small ones as well. Risk is no stranger to most of us.

To laugh heartily is to risk appearing a fool.
To cry is to risk seeming weak before others.
To reach out for another is to risk involvement.
To expose one's feelings is to risk rejection.
To reveal your dreams is to risk ridicule.
To press forward against the odds is to risk failure.
To love is to risk not being loved in return.

As a boy growing up I learned that, if you wanted to enjoy the company of a girl, you usually had to do something about it. We have a bit more equity in our dating patterns today, but in my day the initiative still rested largely with the fellow. I found it was hard enough to bring yourself to ask a girl to dance; asking her for a date could be terrifying.

Now it should have been the easiest thing in the world to approach someone to go with you to a football game, only it wasn't. First, you had to find the right time to ask her, then you had to find her alone and away from her girlfriends—like when she was at her locker.

You also needed to approach her when you had enough time. You couldn't just blurt out what you wanted. You had to work up to it by first asking what the... algebra assignment was or something equally neutral. The indirect route was always better, so you had to move the conversation to its goal step by step.

Timing was important, too. It was best if you had just had scored some minor victory, like an "A" on a recent history test. That way, if you were to be shot down, at least you had something to fall back on to salve your ego. It's consoling to keep in mind that, if you should never be able to get another date in your whole life, you could still be proud of knowing the first twenty American presidents by memory.

You learn to take a lot of knocks growing up, but one of the hardest was being rejected. Even the **fear** of being turned down could give you the shivers. I still remember going over all the reasons in my mind why Sharon wouldn't go with me to the Junior-Senior prom. I backed away from asking her on half a dozen occasions.

Finally I got up the courage to put the question to her. In a shaky voice I managed to get out, "I don't suppose you'd want to go to the prom, would you?" (Smooth line, huh?) I winced and stepped backward as if expecting to get hit, protecting myself from inevitable rejection.

"Sure, I'd like to go," she replied. I couldn't believe she said that, and I didn't even have to plead or beg or bribe her. Now that I think back a lot of life is like that: calculating the risk, dreading the occasion, and then screwing up your courage to act before you lose the opportunity.

A construction crew was laying a drain line as part of a building project. While excavating, the workers uncovered a power cable directly in their path. The foreman called in the head electrician who was supervising the undertaking. The electrician looked down at the cable and assured the foreman that it was dead. "Just cut it out of your way."

"Are you sure there's no danger?" the foreman asked.

"Absolutely," was the reply.

The foreman asked, "Well, then, will you cut it for us?"

The electrician hesitated for a moment, and with a slight smile said, "Well, I'm not **that** sure."

If you're going to try bungee jumping, you had better know what the safety odds are. If you're planning to ask the boss for a raise on Monday, you'd better know how the company stock did last week. If you're going to take out a mortgage on a new house, you'd better calculate your ability to keep up with the payments.

After you know as much as you can about your chances, then you have to make a decision: Will I act on this or not? If you want to know the thrill of taking a plunge into the air below, then you'll have to take a risk. If you want to enjoy a higher salary now, then you'll have to take a risk. If you want that dream home, then you'll have to take a risk. If you want an intimate companion for the life journey, then you'll have to take a risk. None of these things have a 100% guarantee.

Each one of us took a bit of a risk by just coming here today. Accidents happen, and even close to home. But sometimes risks must be undertaken because the greatest hazard in life is not to risk at all.

The person who ventures nothing **does** nothing, **has** nothing, **achieves** nothing. She or he may avoid some possible suffering and sorrow, but without moving ahead she cannot learn, adapt, or grow. When conditioned to avoid change out of dread, an individual really becomes held back by that fear. Only the person willing to take risks is a person who is truly free.

George Buttrick tells of visiting an ancient abbey on the coast of France called "Our Lady of the Risk." Unable to figure out how medieval Catholics came up with such a name, he asked some locals for the story. They told him the name Our Lady of the Risk was given to the abbey in order to honor Mary, because she took a great risk to follow God's intention for her life. They reasoned that her willingness to venture into the unknown would serve as an example for those residing at the abbey.

Paul, in speaking to the elders at Ephesus, reminded them of how he lived among them and served the Lord. "I did not shrink from doing anything helpful, proclaiming the message to you and teaching you publicly and from house to house.... And now I am on my way to Jerusalem, not knowing what will happen to me there, except that the Holy Spirit testifies to me in every city that imprisonment and persecutions are waiting.... But I do not consider my life of any value to myself, if only I may finish... the ministry that I received from the Lord Jesus, to testify to the good news of God's grace."

This reminds us that we can't be a Christian and live risk-free. Jesus encourages us to move out of ourselves that we might find ourselves, and discover God more fully in the process. And so it is with all of life. Sometimes we may have to take the chance of being a fool in the eyes of others in order to be true to ourselves. This will likely require that we move out of our comfort zone, but then that is a cost that most often goes with gain.

We're probably going to have to make hard decisions from time to time to do what is necessary to move forward with our lives. We need to calculate the potential costs, but we can't be afraid to venture out to become the full persons we can be. We can't give fear the upper hand and let it stop us from doing what we really need to do. Remember, too, God's Spirit is our companion, so we never proceed alone.

When it's possible to "go for the gold" in life, why then settle for anything less? We are to use what God has planted within us and let our potential come forward.