

Isaiah 5:1-7
Psalm 80:1-2, 8-19

Hebrews 11:29-12:2
Luke 12:49-56

Early in the Olympic games I was watching men's gymnastics and it happened to be when the Brazilian men gymnasts were performing. I got whiplash, broken ribs, and a ruptured spleen just watching them! I saw floor exercise, pommel horse, still rings, parallel bars and horizontal bars. Holy cow, the things they could do. Jumping, flipping and twisting, flying through the air, and landing on their feet. It was unbelievable to see the power exhibited by the gymnasts during the giant swings, spectacular aerial releases and dismounts, which included multiple flips and airborne travel over the bar. Wow! And if you are impressed by my descriptions of the action, don't be. I got all that lingo looking it up on Wikipedia! But I did see those athletes, and they were amazing. They were amazing!

The first time I watched gymnastics was in 1972, watching Olga Korbut, an athlete from Russia. The media gave her so much attention that there was a surge of young girls joining local gymnasts' clubs, for a sport that seldom was mentioned, but now was in the headlines. She made gymnastics a popular sport. She became a world star. She was the first gymnast to be inducted into the International Gymnastics Hall of Fame. She met Richard Nixon in the White House. We honor the athletes who become the greats in their sports: Michael Jordan, Michael Phelps, Chris Everet, Muhammad Ali, Tiger Woods, and Serene Williams, the great heroes of sports.

Today's lesson from the letter to the Hebrews lists some of the greats of faith. Some of the great heroes and events of Israel's history, of the Old Testament, are listed in this passage. There is the recounting of the crossing of the Red Sea, which is part of the narrative of the central event in the history of Israel, the Passover. This Passover

event is to the Jews what Easter is to Christians. Now that the Egyptian army was destroyed by that same Red Sea, Israel is free again, freed after more than four-hundred years of slavery. The dramatic crossing of the Red Sea was great material for the movie director and producer Cecil B DeMille, who was able to make a great drama from that story in the movie *The Ten Commandments*, which starred Yul Brenner as Moses. The walls of Jericho broke down when the Israelites encircled the city for seven days, leading to Israel's conquering of the city. Rahab was a Gentile harlot who had welcomed the Israelite spies and her family was the only family spared when the walls of Jericho came tumbling down. The author continues listing some of the great people of Israelite history: Gideon, Samson, David, and Samuel. These are some of the people who would have been inducted in a Bible Hall of Fame, a faith Hall of Fame.

Not very many of us become such athletic greats. That is not to say we don't enjoy playing our sports. Some of us are better than others. Some of us may take it rather seriously, while others just enjoy playing. Nor do many of us become great people of faith. And yet we persevere in the faith. Here the author mentions many who were tortured, mocked, flogged, stoned to death, sawn in two, killed by the sword, destitute, persecuted, tormented. We're not talking about a little whiplash or broken ribs here! And yet, they are commended for their faith. They are commended not because they succeeded, but because they persevered.

We do not know who wrote this letter to the Hebrews. The author is anonymous. We know that the addressees had been subject to persecution, imprisonment, and loss of property as a result of their faith. They have met all these trials with joy, and they were to continue in the faith and good works until the coming of the Lord. They were

encouraged to remember the faithful endurance of all the great heroes of the Old Testament. Jesus own life is an example of faithful endurance that Christians should imitate.

Michael Scrogin, author of *The Practical Guide to Christian Living* wrote, "We have Halls of Fame all over this country. There's one in Canton, Ohio, for football; there's one in Springfield, Massachusetts, for basketball; there's one in Cooperstown, New York, for baseball. We have Halls of Fame for all sorts of sports, and we're forever electing aging athletes to these institutions. Speeches are made in their honor as we give them awards. If it were up to me to make the decisions, I would have a different sort of Hall of Fame. I would have a Hall of Fame of those who had given and those who had received second and third and 13th chances. This hall would be huge, and it would be filled mostly with the names of those who had made it against all the odds. I would have a section dedicated especially to those who had been arrested or imprisoned and who later, when they were released, straightened out their lives and didn't go back. I would set aside an entire wall for recovering alcoholics, who'd been up against a devastating disease, who'd hit bottom, but who'd climbed back out. I'd set aside one whole building for teenagers because every teenager needs at least 100 second chances. Then, at the center of this vast complex would be the Perseverance Pavilion. That would be the place where we would honor parents of adolescents."

John Buchanan, who tells this story, relates it to the movie *Grand Canyon*, a story of ordinary people being saved by ordinary things like "kindness, consideration, honesty, loyalty," things that are "as a matter of fact, not simple at all, but always miracles." Buchanan then quotes Karl Rahner, one of the great theologians of the last

century: To keep on through dull, tedious, everyday existence can often be more difficult than a unique deed whose heroism makes us run the danger of pride. Buchanan continues on about the ordinariness of the gospel: "that's where it is for most of us, slugging it out day by day, trying to make ends meet, and to be as good as we can at what we do, and to use what we have responsibly, trying to be honest and kind and just." He then finishes this marvelous sermon with one more quote from Rahner: "When we are true to our conscience...God's kingdom comes to us just where we are, living quite ordinarily, carrying on patiently." In our ordinariness, in the ordinariness of our faith, we can, we must, persevere.

Note here that the author declares that Jesus is the "perfecter" of our faith. In our ordinariness, Jesus is the perfects our faith.

In the name of Christ, our all in all.