

The Moment

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Perhaps one of the greatest moments in U.S. Olympic history took place in Atlanta in 1996 when the U.S. women's gymnastics team took the team competition down to the wire against the Russians. Only tenths of a point separated the two teams and it boiled down to the performance of one young 18 year old American woman – Kerri Strug and her performance on the vault. Most of us remember this. One good run, one good flip, one good landing is what it would take to give the Americans their first Olympic gold medal in the women's gymnastics team competition.

The first of Kerri's two attempts resulted in a poor landing in which she injured her ankle. A sprain and torn tendons. A significant injury that would keep most of us off of our feet. Visibly limping she winced her way back to the start of the runway to prepare for her second vault. A poor run, a poor jump, a poor landing and the Americans might lose. And there she stood with the world looking on. It was her moment.

Rewind fifteen years to when Kerri was three years old and with an older sister who was already a competing gymnast – Kerri began training. 3 years old. Fifteen years of training. Moving from gym to gym, town to town, coach to coach. Injuries, medals, emotional breakdowns, training, training, training. Every day of every week of every year had brought her to this point where she stood before the world with injured ankle expected to run and spin and spring and land on her two feet perfectly. It was the moment. It was the moment her whole life had been about. Everything

had been preparation for the moment. And she was ready. And she did it. Team USA got the gold. And Kerri got onto the Wheaties box.

Four days later a security guard, Richard Jewell, working the overnight detail at Centennial Park in Atlanta noticed a back pack sitting unattended under a park bench. It was the moment. Likely one of a hundred left behind backpacks amidst the millions of Olympic visitors – why bother? But Richard Jewell bothered and took the chance to inconvenience hundreds of people by spending the next several minutes clearing the area escorting hundreds to a perimeter of safety at the risk of being labeled an alarmist. 13 minutes later the backpack exploded and while many were hurt and one was killed – clearly Richard Jewell had saved scores if not hundreds. It was the moment. Unfortunately, Richard Jewell did not end up on a Wheaties box. He ended up being tried unjustly in the newspapers and television – suspected to have planted the bomb in order to play hero. The next months were the worst of his life while America scorned him and made fun of him. It took ten years for the US Attorney's Office to formally clear him of all charges. Americans reluctantly and belatedly praised him. He died the following year.

Who's to know when the moment will come and what will happen once it comes. Rare, of course, is any particular life that ends up before millions of sports viewers or before an explosive device with that moment when all things hang in the balance. Will she stick the landing... will he protect the crowd? – most of us have never found ourselves in such moments of high spectator drama.

And with that in mind perhaps it is tempting for you and me to imagine that maybe what we do from day to day in the grand scheme doesn't much matter. Since we're not aiming for a gold medal and since the chances of diffusing a terrorist plot are slim – what's the big difference with what I do from day to day? What's the point of preparing if the high dram is likely never to come?

Perhaps it's the question Jesus is trying to answer in his parables that Matthew shares with us in chapter 25 of his Gospel. In particular the story of the wise and the foolish maidens waiting for the

wedding. Borrowing from the customs of a first century Palestinian wedding, Jesus wonders if the kingdom of heaven isn't a little like waiting for the moment. The moment when the bridegroom starts the parade into the wedding feast accompanied by the bridesmaids all with lamps aflame. One does not know when the moment will come. When the bridegroom will arrive. Matthew is writing his Gospel for a crowd of people who have every expectation that the Messiah will return imminently – certainly within their lifetime - but he appears delayed. But the kingdom could come at any time – the Christ could arrive at any moment. And when that moment comes will you be ready?

And since we don't know when that moment will come – what we realize is that life isn't about fixating on that promised moment ahead as much as it is focusing on the present moment at hand. For it is in the present moment at hand that Jesus promised his presence. Right? We are practicing the presence of Messiah every day. Jesus said, "The kingdom of heaven is what? Is at hand. Is in your midst. Is within you." So every moment is the practice of the presence of Christ.

And we practice the presence of Christ in those moments that happen to us daily in which we become bearers of the light. Daily we are being called to have on hand the oil that fuels the fire that brings the light into the world that we might let our light shine that others might see our good works and give glory to our Father in heaven. The moment doesn't happen when the camera crews are rolling and when the angels are descending – the moment comes in every moment in which we have the chance to practice the presence of Christ and to find the presence of Christ in every human being that should come our way. We prepare for Jesus triumphant coming in the future in every single person who comes to us in the now. Every moment is a preparation for THE moment.

I do my fair share of airline traveling – many of us do. And there comes a point when flying on a plane gets to feel a little routine. You get on a plane, sit down, buckle your seat belt, listen to the attendant run through the instructions, taxi to the end of the runway and then comes that moment when the pilot opens the throttle and the engines thrust and the plane starts speeding down the runway. Now if you fly enough all that is routine. Even the lifting of thousands of pounds, not to mention a couple hundred people, off the ground and above the clouds – all this is routine. All this is

in a pilot's day's work. It's what she spent years training for. It's what we count on. But as routine as it is, nothing erases the fact that a couple hundred souls are defying gravity and flying contrary to the laws of the universe. We don't pay a lot of attention to that until you are Chesley B. Sullenberger and you see a flock of geese fly into your jet engines and you know that there is no airport close enough to land your powerless plane. Then you know what every moment up until then has been for. You have to employ all those flights, all those training classes, all those flight simulator sessions because now, like Kerri Strug, you are at the end of a runway and you have to make the landing stick. And the only difference is this is real. These are souls I have in my care. These are lives hanging in the balance. And that is a river I'm trying to land on. And now all of sudden every moment that has led to this moment has been inestimable in value.

In every hospital in every town scores of surgeons perform their surgeries. Appendices are removed, gall bladders taken, arteries bypassed, discs fused, cancers cut out – it happens a million times a day – and maybe there is even a bit of routine to it all. But when I sat in the holding room years ago and watched them wheel my daughter away into surgery – there was nothing routine. It was the moment – it was the moment for that surgeon as far as I was concerned -- a moment that I prayed had been preceded by thousands of other moments that had prepared him for this moment. This moment.

So when Jesus tells us the story about the five wise maidens and the five foolish maidens – the five prepared and five unprepared there comes with it this invitation to a rhythm of life that finds us more and more aware and awake to the moments of Messiah in our midst. In other words we live with the arrival of Jesus every day. "I will be with you," he says, "to the close of the age." The truth is Jesus is with us in every moment when we have the chance to shine the light. To be about those Beatitudes in the beginning of Matthew's gospels. To bring peace and mercy and purity of heart and righteousness and meekness and courage to a world that wonders if God really is around. This is the rhythm to which we are invited. Brother Lawrence whose treasured book, *Practicing the Presence of God*, says it this way: "We ought not to be weary of doing little things for the love of God, who

regards not the greatness of the work, but the love with which it is performed.” And we do so because moment to moment we are in the presence of Christ the bridegroom.

The Celts of long ago fashioned the rhythm into the prayer of St. Patrick – the one whom we’ll celebrate in a couple days. So while you're picking up your green outfit, think of this prayer:

I rise today:

in power’s strength, invoking the Trinity,

believing in threeness,

confessing the oneness,

of Creation’s Creator.

.....

Christ with me, Christ before me, Christ behind me;

Christ within me, Christ beneath me, Christ above me;

Christ to the right of me, Christ to the left of me;

Christ in my lying, Christ in my sitting, Christ in my rising;

Christ in the heart of all who think of me,

Christ on the tongue of all who speak to me,

Christ in the eye of all who see me,

Christ in the ear of all who hear me.

I rise today in spirit’s strength ...

The practiced presence of Christ.

Perhaps it was such practice which prepared those good Christian souls to know what to do when the moment came. I'm thinking of the Nickel Mine, Pennsylvania Mennonite community who fell victim to a mentally ill gunman who took the lives of five Amish girls in their schoolhouse. It was the moment. What is a Christian community to do? Oh, but they had been practicing. They had been practicing for 400 years the art of reconciliation and forgiveness. It was their tradition. Peacemaking. In just hours they assembled to pray for the families of those girls – of course – but also to pray for the family of the assailant. And to set up a fund for them. And to invite them into their homes. And to raise that school building of haunting memories and build a new school – the New Hope School. They had been practicing the presence of Christ so that when Messiah came in the broken hearts of the ostracized family they were prepared.

Sobering, such radical grace. But don't you wonder if that isn't what this weary old world is looking for? Don't you wonder if the moment is upon us – with all this radical badness in the world – that we as brother and sisters of the bridegroom, maidens with our lamps – if it isn't time to light the world with our radical goodness? Seeing this moment as the moment? At least to ask yourself, what am I waiting for? Christ shall someday come with his angels, of course. But Christ comes today in those souls. Those souls within reach of my life, your life – scores, hundreds of souls – Christ on the tongue of all who speak to me, Christ in the eye of all who see me, Christ in the ear of all who hear me. Souls for whom radical goodness from you might shine the light. And make the difference. What are you waiting for?

Is it possible that all your moments have been meant for this moment?