

Philippians 4:4-9

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

Exodus 32:1-4

When the people saw that Moses delayed to come down from the mountain, the people gathered around Aaron and said to him, 'Come, make gods for us, who shall go before us; as for this Moses, the man who brought us up out of the land of Egypt, we do not know what has become of him.' Aaron said to them, 'Take off the gold rings that are on the ears of your wives, your sons, and your daughters, and bring them to me.' So all the people took off the gold rings from their ears, and brought them to Aaron. He took the gold from them, formed it in a mould, and cast an image of a calf; and they said, 'These are your gods, O Israel, who brought you up out of the land of Egypt!'

Winners and Losers
Rev. Charles Schuster
October 12, 2008

First of all, I want to thank the Stompers, the Stover Street Stompers, for providing the music today. What a wonderful job you have done for us. And secondly, at the end of the sermon, I would like you to release those balloons. Those are prayers for children, and I would like every balloon to be released, even the ones that don't have a piece of paper on them, because that will be symbolic of our prayers as a congregation for the children of the world.

It's been a very exciting day, this day, to welcome the Wesley Foundation alums, to send off two work teams, one to a Native American reservation and the other to Guatemala, to see the congregation at 9:15 full of children wiggling and squirming, and to be led through the service by the children of our church. It's been a very exciting day, and it continues. We have celebrated Children's Sabbath here at the church for a number of years, and it has always, at this church, been somewhat different than it is in other places. We celebrate our children here, often Children's Sabbath is celebrating children everywhere, and at this church Children's Sabbath has historically been about our kids, but we have made an assumption that is, I think, an important assumption. That is, if we do what we can for the children we know, it will make a difference to the children we don't, and we believe that is true. If we go about making a difference to our children, and through our children, and there is developed such a concern, beyond these walls, then we make a difference in the world. We make a world of difference.

A week ago we were back in my home town, in Morgantown, West Virginia. I had a second cousin named Chris, my grandmother's sister's son. He died this past year. He was a construction worker, and in the bloom of his career he worked overseas in the Middle East. He worked in a very dangerous zone, making roads and bridges and he worked with the US military for his protection, and while he was building a road or a bridge, a child began to tag along after him, a child who was an orphan, who had been raised by his grandfather, but his grandfather had been killed. And the little boy and Chris became really good friends, and Chris let him ride around in the front of his Jeep, and all the generals and sheiks, he made them sit in the back, and that annoyed them. At the end of Chris's time in the country, the little boy begged him to take him back to the States, and Chris thought about it, and he really wanted to do it, and to adopt him, but there was so much red tape, and it was not possible. Chris told my sister earlier this year that it was one of his life's regrets. He should have fought harder to adopt that boy. He always wondered if it would have made any difference.

I think we gather to affirm that it always makes a difference in the world, it always makes a difference if we reach out to the children of the world, and there are two things that I want to tell the children today, and to any adults who happen to be listening in. The first is this, and to remember this, and we told the children and we are reminded ourselves, to go for the gold. That's the theme that the Children and Family Council have given me. Go for the gold. We want all of us to do our best, to go for the gold, and in those words of Jesus, when he was surrounded by the children, his disciples wanted to put them in the nursery so he could preach a sermon and Judas could then pass out the collection plates for the Good News Fundraiser. And Jesus said to his friends, "Suffer the little children, and forbid them not, for to such belongs the kingdom of God."

I never thought that translation really conveyed what Jesus meant. Because I think Jesus was saying, support the children. Give them attention and time, for to them is God's kingdom. And for God, what God wants for them, God wants good for them. Give them a trophy. Give them encouragement. Help them to do their best, and remind them, go for the gold, hope for the future. Build for tomorrow, children, adults. I like what April Carlson wrote. She was responding to the current financial crisis of the past few weeks. She said this. "No one, and I mean no one, knows what the future holds for any of us. But we can choose to close down, we can withdraw into ourselves, we can allow the doom and gloom to take control of us. Or we can lift our eyes to the heavens, put a song in our hearts, a smile on our face, and confront life head-on. Life truly is what we make it. We can welcome fall with open arms. We can enjoy the days and the falling leaves. We can get ready for the holidays. Because it's not what happens to us that makes us strong. It's how we react to it, and we're the only ones who can make that decision.

It was Winston Churchill who said, "Success is going from failure to failure without a loss of enthusiasm." There ought to be a trophy for that. And Elizabeth Kubler-Ross said, "There are no mistakes, no coincidences. All events are blessings given to us to learn from." I like best what Bill Keane said in his cartoon, "The Family Circus." He drew a picture of a little child waking up to face the dawn, who said, "I hope today is one of the

good old days like Grandma used to talk about.” That’s why Jesus said, “Encourage the little children. Help them to do their best.” He knew that, and he wanted them to remember, and us to remember, to go for the gold. Go for the gold. Did you ever win a trophy? Did you ever become a king or a queen and they give you a crown? Did you ever run a race and break the tape at the end, because you came in first? Did you ever throw a pass or catch one in the end zone, or did you ever kick a ball into the goal, or a slapshot puck into the net as time ran out? Did you ever play a piece on the piano, or blow a trumpet like Satchmo, and when the ovation of the crowd died down they gave you a statue and you discovered Beethoven was smiling at you? Go for the gold. Do your best. You’re a winner.

I have won only one trophy. I was an all-star basketball player. It was sixth grade. The Odd Fellows sponsored a little league basketball team, and I played on it, and somehow we got into a tournament, and somehow we got into the championship, and somehow I had the basketball in my hands with three seconds to go, and somehow I threw a pass that was so wild it became a shot, and somehow it went into the basket, and we won the game, and we won the tournament, and our coach Eli Jabber leaped off the bench and caught his trousers on a nail and ripped out the seat of his pants, and everybody jumped on me and somehow they said I was an all-star, and I got a trophy. I was a winner. I went for the gold and I got it. The trophy was a gold-plated piece of metal, shiny, had my name on it in decals, mis-spelled, of course. I put a nail in the wall of my room and I admired it frequently as I’d walk past. I had a parakeet named Moses and one day he flew out of his cage, and he admired it too, he saw himself in the gold plate and he started pecking on the letters, and all of a sudden it said “ill-star.” But it still had my name mis-spelled. But it was a trophy, and it was gold, it was shiny. I was a winner, I was an all-star, or an ill-star, and I was somebody.

We want to go for the gold. We want to do our best. Mike Krzyzewski, he’s a coach at one of the schools in the south, he wrote a book entitled, “Leading with the Heart.” He said, “You want to know who my hero is? My hero is my mother. Everything she did was something that she put her own trademark on. Whatever it was, something as simple as making a batch of chocolate chip cookies. When we were a little poorer, she put three chips in every cookie. When we got a little more money, it’d be four chips. But if you got a chocolate chip cookie that had only two chips, two chocolate chips in it, you knew it wasn’t my mother’s, and from that simple lesson I’ve taken the principle that everything we do has our own personal signature on it, so we want to do it the best we possible can.” Go for the gold. Do what you’re good at. It’s something that we can learn.

Marsha Sinetar said it in a book, and the only thing you really need to know about the book is the title of the book. The title of the book is, “Do What You Love, and the Money Will Follow.” It’s easy to be a winner, not hard to be a good winner, you get praise, and sometimes you get a trophy. But it’s hard to be a loser, and more of us are losers, in that sense, than winners. The older you get, the more times you lose than you win. I want our children to never forget. If Israel learned anything in the Exodus, it is this: God was with them, they are with God, and you can’t turn God into a golden trophy, because a golden trophy of God becomes an idol, and that leads to misplaced values.

God is within us. God is within us, and we tell that to our children, and to any adults who happen to be listening in. They must never forget it, that you are as precious as gold, that there is something in you that money cannot buy, that power cannot push around, that guilt cannot manipulate, that doubt cannot defeat. You're more precious than gold, and your best trophy is not the one that's nailed to a wall or mounted on some shelf. The gold you go for, you've already got. You are more precious than gold.

Paul was writing to the church in Philippi, but he was really writing to all of us when he said, "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, if there's any excellence, if there's anything worthy of praise, think on those things." This past Sunday, Joel had asked if I would speak to the parents of the youth of the church, on the subject of religion and politics. I don't know, it looked like there must have been 75 or 100 kids, and there must have been about 50 or 60 parents, that's my count. There's a lot of them. These days sometimes it's difficult to find much that is true or honorable or pure or lovely or gracious or worthy of praise whenever it comes to that subject of religion and politics. But I did find excellence. The gold that was precious, I heard that it was in the character of those adults who seemed to me to be wonderful parents. Our kids are lucky. Before the meeting with the parents, there was a pot-luck dinner, and there was this one table just full of teenagers and one seat there, and I went over to that table and I said, "Would you folks mind if an old man sat down here beside you?" and they said, no they wouldn't mind. I didn't want them to say that, quite that quickly. But they were great. I mean, hearing them talk, and interacting with them about their lives, it was a high point in my week. And I asked them, I said, "Now, since I'm going to get to speak to your parents, you're going to go off to the youth group, but I'm going to speak with your parents, what would you like me to do with them?" And they looked at me and said, "Confuse them. They think they know so much." And then one of them said, "Tell them we're always good." And then one of them said, "But remind them about forgiveness." I said, "Let me see if I have this. You want me to tell them that you're always good and when they are suspicious that you're not what they think you are, that you have done something wrong or that you have failed to do something you should have done, that you really did your best, or you didn't mean to do your worst, because you've always been trying to do what's right even when it turns out wrong." And they said, "Yeah, tell them that, because it'll confuse them." And I did. I told them whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is lovely, whatever is gracious, whatever is worthy of praise, to think on those things.

Go for the gold inside us. We are good as gold. When we fail, when we lose, when we face defeat, when things aren't working out for us. They told Bill Cosby that he was a disruptive force in school, and I bet that he was. His life was not focused, they said, and he dropped out of school, but he was good as gold and he knew it. They told Mary Lou Retton that she was too small to be an athlete, that she ought to be a cheerleader. There's nothing wrong with cheerleaders, but she was a pretty good athlete, don't you think? And they made fun of Michael Phelps. They said he couldn't learn, but his mother kept telling him he was more precious than gold, and he believed it. And they told Gandhi that he would never become anything more than a mediocre scholar, as they reviewed his

academic record. And one day in class he mis-spelled the word kettle, and his teacher called him stupid, because he was the only one who missed it. He was as good as gold. There are tough times in every life. There are days when we wonder how we will make it or where we will take it. There are those days when we go for the gold, we go for the gold that's inside us, we are more precious than gold. Our best trophy's in our heart.

It was Malcolm Forbes who said, "Diamonds? Do you know what a diamond is? A diamond, it's nothing more than a chunk of coal that stuck to its job." The score at the end of the game only means that time ran out if you lose, and the list at the end of the track meet, when we came in toward the bottom, just simply means the track was too long, we're sprinters and not marathon runners. And sometimes it looks like we lost, but never is it true that we're losers, because there's gold in us, more precious than gold. See, we never lose when we do our best. And when we do less than that, we always know that there'll be another time and another chance. And we're never down, when we know which way is up, and discover how to rise from our last defeat. Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is pure, lovely, gracious, worthy of praise, we think on these things. And when we think on these things, we can learn to crawl when it looks like we're being down, or learn to walk when it seems like there's no place to go. Or learn to run when everything seems in slow motion. We can learn how to look for the sun to shine when it's midnight in our soul. Or learn to smile sometimes when the gloom is thick in the air. We can learn to laugh again when we suffer loss, because simply loss re-acquaints us with what we've gained. We are not losers, we are not lost. We are not defeated. We have not quit. And our children must never forget it, and any adults listening in. We are more precious than gold.

Tip O'Neill, he wrote a book entitled "All Politics is Local." My favorite story in this book is one that I've told before, and I'll tell it again. It's a good story. A legislator had been away for a month. He came home. He was trying to catch up on his reading, his mail and his newspapers, and his son was badgering him – "Come on, Dad, come out in the back yard and let's pass a baseball." "Now son, let me read my mail here." "No, come on Dad." This went on back and forth and finally he said, "Now, I've got to read these papers, but I want you to do something for me." And he took a map of the world that was in one of the newspapers, and he tore it in half and he tore it in quarters and then in eighths and then finally in sixteenths and he said, "I want you to go out into the kitchen and put this map back together." In two minutes he came back. His father said, "I'm impressed. There are a hundred and twenty countries, and you got them all." The kid said, "Dad, there was a child's picture on the other side of the map and I just fitted it together." The important part of that story is Tip O'Neill's response. "Put the children together right, and the world will take care of itself."

It's Children's Sabbath, we take the time to think about our children. We believe that we can make a difference in the world. We think it will make a world of difference. Do you remember that story I told you about my cousin Chris in the Middle East building a highway, and the little child had come to be with him, and he had taken care of him when his grandfather had been killed. You remember the story. You remember how the little boy begged Chris, "Take me back to America. Take me to freedom." But he said he

couldn't do it, because he was told. They said, "He's just a kid. Let it go, Chris. What difference does it make?" Chris always wondered what happened to that little boy. Did he survive, did he grow up? What kind of man did he become? What might have happened to that kid if somebody would have cared, just somebody? You learn something about that boy. And he confesses this to my sister, this summer, just before Chris died Amy was hearing stories about our family, and so she recorded this, and I've heard it too. Chris learned the name of that boy several years ago, and what happened to him. His name was Saddam Hussein. His name was Saddam Hussein. If only somebody would have cared, the world would be a different place. We simply cannot make that mistake. Please release the balloons.