

“For every house is built by someone, but the builder of all things is God.”

- Hebrews 3:4

In the summer of 2016, Simone Biles went to the Olympics in Rio and dazzled the world with her grace and skill as a gymnast. My daughter Lia was 5 at the time, and we spent several evenings tuned into the TV to watch the best gymnastics in the world - maybe the best of all time- and went to sleep each time in awe of what the human body can do.

This gave my wife and I the brilliant idea that our daughter was flexible, maybe we should figure out how to get her into gymnastics. I suspect we were not alone. Watch any baby grow up and you learn that imitation is fundamental to human development. My kids always seem to learn my worst habits, despite my best efforts not to teach them those.

Most of us imagine our own lives based on what we've seen and heard in the lives of others. Whenever someone strives to reach the fulness of her own potential, other people notice. We don't simply admire Simone Biles because of what she can do. Each of us also has to ask, even if we couldn't possibly say it aloud, “I wonder if in any alternative universe that I might be able to do that too?” (I can save you the trouble, you can't).

In Scripture when the Apostle Paul searches for a metaphor to help people imagine the spiritual life, he often chooses the Olympic athlete. “Train yourself to be godly,” he writes to Timothy (1 Tim 4:7), using the same greek word that was used to describe Olympic training. To the Corinthians he writes that this is his own model: “But I discipline my body and keep it under control, lest after preaching to others I myself should be disqualified.” (1 cor 9:27). In the language of the Letter to the Hebrews, all such striving is imitation of Christ himself, Paul say we must see Jesus as the founder and perfecter of our faith.

Imitate me as I imitate Christ, the apostle says. When someone in contemporary society fasts for forty days or gets up to pray in the middle of the night or sells her possessions to give to the poor, we worry about her. That kind of devotion seems extreme. Yet such discipline for the sake of Olympic glory is not considered masochism. When my daughter watched Simone Biles, it seemed natural for her to want to become what she'd seen.

When we see the fullness of our own potential in someone else, it only makes sense to do everything we can to pursue it.

One thousand six hundred years ago, in the desert of Upper Egypt, monasticism was born as a movement to follow the way of Jesus to the fullness of our potential as daughters and sons of God. By most every account, Abbas Anthony was the spiritual gold-medal Olympian of ancient Egypt. So many people went out into the wilderness to imitate his asceticism that his biographer, the bishop of Alexandria, said “The desert became a city.”

I love the story Saint Jerome tells in his *Life of Paul the Hermit* about how Anthony, in his nineties, had a vision of a man, someone even further advanced on the way to holiness that he was, living in a remote cave somewhere in the desert. Knowing that he had to learn from this man, even without knowing where he was - even if he died trying to find him - the 90+ Anthony set out across the hot sand of Upper Egypt, trusting God would show him the way. (Ask yourself what you would do if you learned that your grandparent had decided to make such a pilgrimage.)

Of course, God leads Anthony to Paul the Hermit. Standing at the door of his cave, the great Abba Anthony begs to come in and sit at the feet of this man no one had ever heard of. Anthony even says that he’ll have to lay down and die there if Paul doesn’t grant him an audience. Opening the door with a wry smile, Paul asks, “Are you surprised that I didn’t rush to greet you after you threatened to die on my doorstep?”

Yes, you are supposed to laugh. Because in the end, the joke is on each of us. Whenever we see someone living the life, that’s really life - that fullness of what we were made for - it only makes sense that we would want to imitate it. Jesus says it would make perfectly good sense for us to go and sell everything we have to buy the pearl of great price. So we give ourselves to imitation. We strive to follow the way that has been paved by those who’ve gone before us - Christ himself chief among them.

All of this is natural, and it is good. But in the end, the joke is on us because no amount of training and striving - no discipline or monasticism - guarantees that we will grow up into the fullness of Christ who fills everything. I love that Saint Anthony knew, even at the end of his life, that he still had so much to learn. I love that he was still willing to sacrifice everything to sit at the feet of the one who could teach him. And I love that Paul laughed at him - that he helped him to laugh at himself because, amid all the striving, God had already done everything that was needed to make him full.

I love that old story about Abbas Anthony and Paul for the same reason that I love this text this morning. It takes serious work to build a house, and it takes a lot of work to do what's ours to do in life. Our Hebrews text begins by making a great comparison, one the gospel writer of Matthew also wants us to see, that Jesus is the perfecter of Moses, Moses was faithful to God’s house, and so was Christ.

This text calls us, like the Desert practitioners of old, given their attention to training for godliness in the small things of everyday life. If a builder of a house deserves more glory than the house itself, then we must learn to appreciate the skill required to swing a hammer, to frame a wall, to tile a shower, to lay flooring, to build a kitchen table. We need to turn our attention to the small things in life, not the grand accomplishments.

Doing so will teach us the value of living a life paying attention to the things required to do the thing we admire. We need to learn to appreciate the stories about Simone Biles on those cold days where she was so devoted that she got out of bed when she didn't want to, to go practice her floor routine. Like Abbas Anthony who even after amassing a lot of followers who wanted to practice *his* way of following Jesus, left to walk out into the wilderness once more, in search of another who practiced the fullness of faith.

When we were in Chicago for our annual youth mission trip, we got to know the section of the city on the north west side. We stayed in Albany Park, which I learned, is one of the most diverse zip codes in the United States. We got to see and serve in places like Humboldt Park (the only Puerto Rican neighborhood in the continental United States), Ravenswood, Uptown, and Lawndale just to name a few of the neighborhoods.

We got to know the area and its history, we looked at the way these neighborhoods had grown and changed over the last 40-50 years. We saw gentrification and poverty stricken areas, we learned about gang culture in these neighborhoods and those yellow safe passage signs which kids have to get walked to and from school just so they can do it without being harassed.

We spent time bonding with kids growing up in the midst of all of this in Lawndale at a YMCA and the Albany Park Community Center. I sat and listened to a 4th grader tell me about how his sister was murdered 6 months before, as his voice trailed off and the ache hung in the air. We served dinner in Ravenswood at All Souls church where they do it family style with honestly some of the best food I've ever eaten prepared at a church (no offense Debby and Nancy). We served dinner in a formerly condemned building where they do 3 meals a day, year round to friends and neighbors who are experiencing homelessness or staying in their now whole block of buildings converted into shelters. We played bingo in an elderly low-income housing building where most of the folks didn't speak English but they smiled and shouted for joy when one won a silly dollar-store clapper that we had brought as a prize.

Through it all we learned, that the city of Chicago had so much more to teach us than we could bring it. We saw that relationships is what it is all about, and that generosity and God's spirit is found everywhere, especially in places that you might not expect to find it.

I'm telling you all of this because I want to tell you a story about our last night together on the trip. We were gathered in for dinner and worship with all the other groups from around the midwest who were serving in Chicago that week. I think there were 9 churches, and when gathered together we were well over 100 folks. We sang a few songs and we had volunteers share where their group saw God while serving.

Then they introduced our guest speaker for the night. Pastor Jonathan Brooks, otherwise known as Pastah J. At least that's what he told us to call him, cause that's what everyone in his neighborhood calls him. He shared about how he grew up in one of the most dangerous neighborhoods in Chicago, and he left, he got several master degrees, and then found that God led him back to serve his community. He shared about how the neighborhood had lots to teach him as well. But relevant to our time together this morning he shared something that I think will stick with all of us who served that week.

He told us, "We're so glad you're here, but we don't need you." Pastah J hit us like a bag of oranges to the gut. He started telling us about how God was already doing amazing things in neighborhoods like Englewood or Lawndale or Uptown. He was really glad that we got a chance to hang out in their great city, and to learn from it, but then he reminded us that Chicago isn't ours to fix. That's God's job in partnership with the folks in those neighborhoods that God is gonna use. And that our calling is was back wherever we came from, that our role was to see that playing with and mentoring kids is something that needs to happen here in Columbia, that there are lonely senior citizens who could use a group of teenagers to play bingo in Columbia, that there are people experiencing homelessness in Columbia.

I think Pastah J was hitting a homerun. He was reminding all of us that no matter how hard you want to fix something, that change isn't always in our hands. But we each have a life to live. We each can see that while we want to build great houses, the builder of all things is God.

Understanding this tells us that the life of faith is not easy - that it takes no less effort to live the way of Jesus than Simone Biles put into her Olympic triumph. Practicing the way of Jesus in our college town takes no less effort that to live it in the Upper desert of ancient Egypt - in some ways I see that it's even harder. Wherever we are, it turns out, there is a cross to carry if we are willing. God is building something right here, in our church, in our community, in our city, that God wants each of us to be a part of today.

I can hear Jesus saying to the disciples “It is your Creator’s good pleasure to give you the kingdom.” (Luke 12:32). I hear Abba Anthony whispering at the end of his life, “I no longer fear God, but I love God.”

At the end of the day, the joke is on them, on us, on me. And I can’t help but laugh. I laugh till I cry, just like I imagine Simone Biles must have when, after all those years of work, she nailed her routine, won the gold, and knew deep down inside that it was all a gift.

A gift that is freely offered to each of us, at this table, by its very host. That’s what the writer of this letter to the Hebrews, I think, is trying to tell us here. He is trying to tell us that you can set the foundation, you can put up walls, you can cover them with a roof, you can finish it out right, and yet you need to learn to put a table in it to make it a home.

At our tables, we learn that we can’t make the sun shine, or the rains come, or the crops grow. We can tend the soil, watch the weather, plant in the right season, but we can’t make them grow.

Just as we can help provide safe affordable shelter for those in our community through volunteering and supporting Habitat for Humanity, but it takes the homeowner and their family to turn it into a home.

Life is ultimately a gift, and Jesus seems to have known that, and tried to give us a daily practice to remember it by, that if we to truly live a life of fullness, we have to know that at the center of it all is a gift. And the glory goes to the very creator of life itself.

Jesus at the table reminds us that it is his life lived, broken, and poured out so that we’ll know that we too have a place at the everlasting feast of God. That we don’t have to be like Simone Biles of faith to be welcomed in. And perhaps we should all be more like Paul the hermit who laughed about it all.

We have to be willing to do more than live the disciplined life (although we are called to do that too), we have to start by accepting that God offers us eternal life as a gift, that each and every person is welcomed into Christ’s kingdom, free of charge.

I think that’s what Pastah J was teaching us that last night in Chicago. He was teaching us that we should be glad we’re here, and we should absolutely put in our best to love others as ourselves, while we’re here. Yet at the same time remember, that God doesn’t need us to get it done, God chooses to transform houses into homes because God offers us God’s heart and invites us to bring ours along for the journey.

Thanks be to God. Amen.