Love in Any Language

1 Corinthians 13:4-8 (AMP)

4 Love endures long and is patient and kind; love never is envious nor boils over with jealousy, is not boastful or vainglorious, does not display itself haughtily.5 It is not conceited (arrogant and inflated with pride); it is not rude (unmannerly) and does not act unbecomingly. Love (God’s love in us) does not insist on its own rights or its own way, for it is not self-seeking; it is not touchy or fretful or resentful; it takes no account of the evil done to it [it pays no attention to a suffered wrong]. 6 It does not rejoice at injustice and unrighteousness, but rejoices when right and truth prevail.

7 Love bears up under anything and everything that comes, is ever ready to believe the best of every person, its hopes are fadeless under all circumstances, and it endures everything [without weakening]. 8 Love never fails [never fades out or becomes obsolete or comes to an end].

Like many of you, Mary and I have been enjoying watching the Olympics. Every 4 years since I was a kid I’ve been looking forward to them. I haven’t always watched them, but just knowing that pretty much every four years they show up – well there is something dependable about them.

The Olympics have actually been around quite a while. The first known Olympic contest took place as long ago as 776 B.C. in Olympia, Greece. And like today, the contest was held at four-year intervals, or olympiads, for almost 1,200 years, until A.D. 394. In fact, for those 1,200 years, time was counted in olympiads, before years and months were used then. They were abolished by Roman Emperor Theodosius I after Greece lost its independence and reinstated 1503 years later in 1896.

For the first thirteen olympiads, the Games consisted of only a single footrace of about 200 yards (180 meters), and the Games were celebrated just one day. Only young freeborn Greek men were allowed to participate, and they ran their one event naked. Married women were of course not allowed to watch the Olympics by penalty of death. Gradually, the duration of the Games was extended as they added other events such as chariot races, running with armor, jumping, boxing, wrestling, the discus, and the javelin.

The greatest honor any Greek could attain was winning the simple branch of wild olive given to a victor in the Games. Kings competed alongside commoners; even the Roman Emperor Nero sought Olympic honors.

An Olympic Truce was enacted during the celebration so that participants could travel from their homes to Olympia safely. The Olympic gathering was a celebration of the human body, but also attracted artisans and politicians.

As time passed, four similar national contests developed in various parts of Greece — the Olympic, Isthmian, Nemean and Pythian Games. The Isthmian Games took place every two years in Corinth, and would have been familiar to Church members living there in Paul's time. Paul pointed out some meaningful spiritual lessons to the Corinthians by referring to these Games.

So it seems Paul was a sports fan and used that to his teaching advantage. Corinthians 9:24 -- “*Do you not know that in a race all the runners run, but only one gets the prize?*” Only one person in each race at the Games received the victor's crown or wreath of celery and pine leaves. That verse concludes by saying, “*Run in such a way that you may obtain it*.” Paul compares our spiritual journey to a race and urges us to run with intention and focus, and with the comforting knowledge that although only one person in an Olympic race can win, everyone who runs well in our life’s race can win.

Verse 25 says, “*Everyone who competes in the games goes into strict training. They do it to get a crown that will not last, but we do it to get a crown that will last forever*.” Paul shows that every successful athlete at the Games had to exercise rigorous self-discipline. So it is at the modern Olympics, too. The athletes who succeed at the 2016 Rio Olympics will be men and women who have sacrificed many of the pleasures other people enjoy to devote countless hours of exhausting struggle, sweat and toil in training for their events.

It is interesting that the Greek word translated "competes" in verse 25 is *agonizomenos*, which literally means "agonizes." Yet these athletes went through all this just to obtain a "crown that will not last." How much more should we discipline ourselves spiritually and agonize for our prize, a "crown of righteousness" (II Timothy 4:8), a "crown of glory that does not fade away" (I Peter 5:4)!

The life of a spiritual being living with a human context is not easy; we don’t coast or cruise along without effort. A Christ-driven life demands our attention and struggle. We will agonize as we face our ego squarely and say, “Not today! You will not seduce me off course today.”

If you haven’t noticed, it requires our constant effort to seek God and be close to Him in a materialistic world that tempts us away from the Light. We need to drive ourselves forward with every ounce of spiritual strength and determination we have, just as an Olympic-class athlete urges and pushes his body on to achievement.

In I Corinthians 9:26, we read: “*Therefore I do not run like someone running aimlessly; I do not fight like a boxer beating the air*.” Paul alludes to the boxing events at the Games, and says that he doesn't fight like a shadow boxer, beating the air without purpose or an adversary. We know our purpose — to express the Christ through our actions, words, and deeds. We know our adversary — our human earthly thinking. We need to keep our eyes on our goal while ingbe ever mindful of our small self.

The word translated "discipline" in verse 27 ("But I discipline my body and bring it into subjection") literally means "give a black eye to." Paul realized he needed to box and "pommel" his own body, with stringent self-discipline, in order to ensure he stayed on the right track in his personal spiritual life.

There is much to learn from the Olympics, as we watch the athletes from all over the world come together to compete passionately, yet amicably. They respect each other and know what their opponents have sacrificed to get to the Games. I marvel at the diversity of the competitors. Yet, when their National Anthem is played the look of appreciation, gratitude, and love of country is the same.

We are more similar than we are different. We want the same things. We love the same. We experience the pain of rejection and failure the same, and the jubilance of victory the same. I am inspired by the Olympics because I recognize the commitment to being the best we can be in those athletes. They all don’t rise to the occasion, yet there are those who don’t capture a medal but do rise to the best that they could be.

That inspires me. We don’t have to be the greatest to be our best. We don’t have to say the perfect words to say words that are meaningful. We don’t have to love like the Christ to love the most we can. When I watch the Olympics, the love the athletes feel from their families and compatriots is the same regardless of their language or their country. The love and appreciation they share looks the same in any language.

My prayer is that we use the Christ as our interpreters so that we can recognize and accept love from the diverse Family of God.

Let us pray…