

**First Presbyterian Church  
Southampton, New York  
“What are We Full of?”**

**Matthew 16: 13 – 20  
Romans 12: 1 – 8**

**July 31, 2016**

Well, I got to admit, I'm so psyched that the Olympics begin next week! I mean, I love the Olympics, and I'm going to watch as much as I can... although, I usually draw the line at staying up past midnight to see ping pong, badminton, and team handball! But when it comes to track and field... well, I'll stay up all night to watch that! And it's usually worth it, because there will be some incredible athletes performing out on that Olympic track. And I want to begin this morning by looking back at a couple of them... who competed in the 2008 Beijing Olympics.

First, there was Jamaican sprinter Usain Bolt... who won both the 100 and 200 meter races, and was part of the gold-medal winning 400 meter relay team. Bolt's performance was so dominating, that not only did he win three gold medals... he became the first person in the history of the Olympic Games to set world records in all three sprint events. There's absolutely no question that the man was, and still is, one of the all-time great sprinters... and it was simply awe-inspiring to see the way that he completely overwhelmed his world-class competition.

What was *not* quite so awe-inspiring, however, was the cocky and self-absorbed demeanor which Bolt displayed... as he was laying waste to the record book, and winning his three gold medals. Now, in 2008 Usain Bolt was a young guy, and I think he's matured a lot since then. But his post-race celebrations included a lot of preening... self-congratulating... strutting around... and generally proclaiming himself the greatest ever. Even before he crossed the finish line in the hundred meter race, Bolt was pounding his chest, hot-dogging, and mugging for the crowd.

And after his win in the two hundred, rather than congratulate his vanquished opponents, he instead paraded around the stadium pointing to himself... sticking his face in front of various TV cameras and shouting, *“I am number one! I am number one!”* An exercise in good sportsmanship it wasn't.

Without question, Usain Bolt was the fastest man in Beijing, or any other place on earth... but by no means was he the classiest, a fact that was noted by many of the commentators and other athletes who were present for the games. (Although, in fairness, it should be pointed out that, after winning the 400 meter relay, Bolt did pledge fifty-thousand dollars of his own money to assist victims of the earthquake which devastated the Sichuan region of China earlier that month.)

Now, contrast Usain Bolt's self-congratulation tour with the other Olympic athlete I want to mention... American hurdler Lolo Jones. Lolo Jones arrived in Beijing as the overwhelming favorite to win the gold medal in the women's 100 meter hurdles. She had recently won the U.S. Olympic trials in dominating fashion... she was running better than she'd ever run in her life... and she was clearly faster than any of the other runners who lined up against her in the finals that day.

And, sure enough, for eighty meters, Lolo Jones did exactly what everyone thought she'd do: she dominated the race. Even after getting off slowly out of the blocks, by fifty meters she was pulling into the lead, and by seventy-five meters she had cleared the field and was on her way to winning by a large margin. As she would go on to say later, *“I could already feel the gold medal around my neck.”*

But then, disaster. As Jones went over the ninth hurdle, she clipped it with her lead leg... and stumbled, just momentarily. But at that high level, and with everyone around her running at that high

speed, even a small bobble is catastrophic. And by the time Jones crossed the finish line, she had fallen all the way from the glory of a gold medal... to the anonymity of seventh place.

The difference between winning and finishing seventh... was exactly eighteen-hundredths of a second. About the time it takes to snap your fingers. But, for Lolo Jones, it might as well have been eighteen hundred *hours*... her Olympic dream had now officially become her worst nightmare. Four years of training, discipline, and dedication... right down the tubes, because of one small mistake.

Now, after the race, Jones was, of course, devastated... distraught... on her knees on the track, holding her head in her hands. Yet, in spite of her bitter disappointment, she picked herself up... walked to the waiting NBC broadcast crew... and dutifully conducted a post-race television interview. And through it all, she handled herself with grace, humility, and class. She congratulated the runners who had beaten her... she placed the blame for her failure squarely on her own shoulders... she demonstrated great courage and character, in front of a billion TV viewers, on the most disappointing day of her life.

Usain Bolt... and Lolo Jones. Two marvelous Olympic athletes. One filled with ego, cockiness, and self-congratulation... the other filled with poise, grace, and a queen-sized helping of class. And both serving as beautiful reminders to us that there are, indeed, so many different things that we can be "*full of.*"

Over the years I suppose I've been told that I'm "full of" a lot of things... a few of which I probably shouldn't mention from the pulpit! Occasionally after the Sunday sermon, it's been suggested that I'm full of hot air... my kids have often reminded me that I'm full of too much worry about their daily wellbeing... when driving on the streets of Southampton, I'm usually full of fear over anybody else with a steering wheel in their hands.

We can be full of our careers... we can be full of our hobbies and avocations... we can be full of self-righteousness, immaturity, and the need to fill the minds of others with thoughts of ourselves. We can be full of anger, and we can be full of peace... we can be full of unhappiness, and we can be full of joy... we can be full of mercy, and we can be full of the desire for vengeance. We can be full of foolishness or wisdom... worldliness or holiness... understanding or confusion... love, or hate, or indifference. We can be full of the spirit of modern culture... or the Spirit of Almighty God. And on, and on, it goes.

Every once in a while, someone will say to us, "*Ahhh, you're full of it!*" And, it's true! We are *full*... of so many different thoughts, feelings, attitudes, and attributes. And in our Scripture lesson this morning, from Paul's letter to the Roman church, we're reminded of one more thing we need to be "full of..." if we want to make good progress in our growth as Christian disciples. And what Paul says we need to be "full of" is... *humility*. Humbleness... modesty... a realistic self-assessment of our worth, our importance, our place within the overall mission and ministry of the church.

As was the case with many first-century congregations, the Roman church to which Paul wrote this letter was a place of both great spiritual power... and vast human conflict. The Lord had been doing many wonderful things among the Christian disciples in Rome... but those same Christian disciples were on the verge of goofing everything up because of their pride, self-absorption, and attitude of spiritual arrogance.

Like the Corinthian church to which Paul also wrote, the Romans, apparently, were in danger of seeing their ministry get sidetracked... as people battled and squabbled over who possessed the better spiritual gifts, and who should have the most prominent place of leadership, and who had the most important role in the ongoing mission of the church. The Romans were supposed to be focusing on *God*... and His will and purpose for their church family. But apparently they were spending too much time focusing on *themselves*... and their battles for prestige and position within their church family.

And it was to *that* situation of self-absorbed conflict that Paul wrote this:

*“Therefore I urge you, brothers and sisters, in view of God’s mercy, to offer your bodies as living sacrifices, holy and pleasing to God – this is your spiritual act of worship. Do not conform any longer to the pattern of this world, but be transformed by the renewing of your mind. Then you will be able to test and approve what God’s will is – his good, pleasing and perfect will.*

*“For by the grace given me I say to every one of you: Do not think of yourself more highly than you ought, but rather think of yourself with sober judgment, in accordance with the measure of faith God has given you.*

*“Just as each of us has one body with many members, and these members do not all have the same function, so in Christ we who are many form one body, and each member belongs to all the others. We have different gifts, according to the grace given us. Prophesying in proportion to faith; those who serve, in serving; the teacher in teaching; those who give encouragement; generosity, by contributing to the needs of others; in leadership through diligent governance; and in cheerfully showing mercy.”*

In other words, Paul says, ministry is a team effort. The mission of the church is a collaborative venture between Almighty God, and the disciples that God empowers. The work of a Christian congregation requires many gifts, many skills, many different people contributing in many different ways to the overall health and strength of the body. And, as Paul stressed to the Corinthians, so he now stresses to the Romans, nothing short-circuits that collaborative team effort between Father and followers more than the presence of pride... or arrogance... or a self-exalting attitude that says “I’m more important than you are.” So, no, Paul says... you’re all important. You’re all essential. You all have a role to play in the building of the kingdom of God. And the only appropriate response to that great and abiding truth is... humility. Modesty. Grace.

If we think again, for a moment, about the Olympics, and the gold medal performance of our friend, Usain Bolt... it’s easy to see the truth, and the power, of the point that Paul is making. Because, even though Usain Bolt was center stage, in the spotlight, on the track in Beijing... could he have ever possibly gotten there, without the assistance and encouragement of a small army of coaches, trainers, doctors, organizers, teammates, family members, and friends?

Would he have ever won a gold medal... without someone to encourage him to follow his dream, and to develop his skills? Would he have ever set a world record... without someone to teach him how to run, and to help him recover from his injuries? Would he have ever been in the Olympics... without someone to inspire him, and challenge him, and correct him when lapsed into bad training habits? Would you and I even know that there *was* such a person as Usain Bolt... without about a thousand people standing behind him, out of the spotlight, receiving no applause or glory, but doing everything they could to help him?

Of course, the answer to all those questions is a resounding **no**. Which is why Bolt’s chest-thumping proclamation of “I am the greatest!” was so out of whack. And what Paul wants us to understand is that, what’s true for track and field, is also true for Christian discipleship... whether it be in first century Rome, or twenty-first century Southampton, New York.

Our Heavenly Father has given each of us an important role to play in life, in faith, in the day to day duties of our Christian walk. Sometimes we may be in the spotlight... sometimes we may get the headlines... sometimes we may be the ones who get all the attention. And, sometimes we may be anonymous... sometimes we may be behind the scenes... sometimes we may labor in the shadows, out of sight, offstage, back in the pack where nobody even notices that we’re there.

Either way, our Lord is up to something with us. Either way, our Father is accomplishing something in us. Either way, our Risen Savior is doing something through us that matters, greatly, to the plan He has for our church... for our community... for the world in which we live. Which is why

we should never be too concerned about our place, our prestige, the importance of our position within the body of believers. We shouldn't think too highly of ourselves, because God already thinks highly of us... no matter who we are, no matter what He's called us to do. We're all in this faith enterprise together... and it's as we serve the Lord together that we can truly accomplish great and life-changing things in His name.

So, what are we full of this morning? There's a lot of possibilities on the menu. Whatever else we choose to order, let's make sure to grab a generous portion of humility... with a side dish of grace, and peace, and hope!

That's the recipe for a growing faith... and a healthy church... and a life with Christ that truly makes a difference!

In the name of the Father, and the Son, and the Holy Spirit, amen!