

## Be a Life Force

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Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost  
August 30, 2020

Psalm 26:1 – 8  
Exodus 3:1 – 15  
Romans 12:9 – 21 (NIV)  
Matthew 16:24 – 28

### FOCUS TEXTS:

Then Jesus told his disciples... “For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” – Matthew 16:24a, 25

“Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves.” – Romans 12:10 (NIV)

Oh, how I miss the Summer Olympic Games. I wish they would have been able to occur this year. The Summer Olympics have created some great stories over the years. Here’s one of those stories...

Sixty years ago, in 1960, in Rome, Italy, at the Rome Olympic games, there was an Olympian named Wilma Rudolph, a female track star. She was born in 1940 in Tennessee, and, went to Tennessee State University. Before I tell you how her story ended, let me tell you how her story started. Early in her life, Wilma Rudolph contracted that crippling disease that afflicted Franklin Delano Roosevelt, and many others. Wilma Rudolph contracted polio when she was four years old. While she was lucky enough to survive, the disease weakened Wilma and paralyzed her left leg. At age five, thinking the paralysis was permanent, Wilma was fitted with a steel brace on her crippled left leg. The idea of Wilma Rudolph ever running was completely out of the question.

The real question was, “Would she ever even be able to walk?” And walk she did, and, run she did. In 1960, Wilma Rudolph, who spent her early years imprisoned in a steel brace, won three (not one, not two, but three) gold medals in the 1960 Olympic games in track & field. She outran her competitors in three different races.

Someone asked her how she found the motivation to overcome polio, and to do what no one thought she could do. And, here was her answer... She said that her doctors told her that she would never be able to walk. Her father told her that she would never be able to walk. But, her mother told her that she would be able to walk. And instead of listening to all the negatives, Wilma Rudolph just believed her mother. And walk she did; and run she did; she ran into the pages of athletic and Olympic history. And so many years later, sixty years later, think about Wilma Rudolph, in relationship to the phrase, “down, but not out.” Wilma

Rudolph was about as far down as a person can be in terms of physical mobility. What ever put it into her head that she would be able to accomplish all that she did in her life?

Then, her mother entered the picture. Her mother became a life force for Wilma by telling her, "I think you will be able to do it; just because you are down, does not mean that you are out." The spirit of that life force is what I want to lift up for all of us – that you can be down, but not be out. Someone told you that you could not; someone else told you that you could. That spiritual life force is what all of us need, so we can face the hardships that find their way into our lives.

That life force message can be found in the two Biblical texts that I chose to go with the title of this morning's message. The first text is from verses 24 and 25 of Matthew 16: Then Jesus told his disciples... "For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it."

Because I thought this text from Matthew leaves too much to interpretation, I chose a companion lectionary text from Paul's letter to the small start-up churches in Rome, verse 10 of Romans, Chapter 12, "Be devoted to one another in love. Honor one another above yourselves." I thought this verse 10 did a great job of explaining what was intended by verses 24 and 25 of Matthew 16.

Now, let's turn to today's Old Testament lesson... "Honoring one another above yourselves" is not a good description of the life of Moses when he lived in the house of Pharaoh, which was prior to the burning bush story in Chapter 3 of Exodus. Going back into Chapter 2 of Exodus, we hear a scary story about Moses. Beginning at verse 11 of Exodus, Chapter 2, in the NIV Bible:

One day, after Moses had grown up, he went out to where his own people were and watched them at their hard labor. He saw an Egyptian beating a Hebrew, one of his own people. Looking this way and that and seeing no one, Moses killed the Egyptian and hid him in the sand. The next day Moses went out and saw two Hebrews fighting. Moses asked the one in the wrong, "Why are you hitting your fellow Hebrew?"

The man said, "Who made you ruler and judge over us? Are you thinking of killing me as you killed the Egyptian?" Then Moses was afraid and thought, "What I did must have become known."

When Pharaoh heard of this, he tried to kill Moses, but Moses fled from the house of Pharaoh and went to live in Midian (which is an area that includes a mountain range in northwestern Saudi Arabia and is at the very northern end of the Red Sea). There Moses met and married his wife, Zipporah, who gave Moses a son. Moses began working as a shepherd for his father-in-law, Jethro. In his new family and extended family, Moses found the life force that he needed so badly when he ran away from Pharaoh.

I believe that life force family support put Moses in the right place (in his heart and his mind) to be accepting of the invitation that God presented to him in the "burning bush" experience.

In the "burning bush" story that we heard in today's reading from Exodus, God told Moses these words: "The cry of the Israelites has now come to me; I have seen how the Egyptians

oppress them. So come, I will send you to Pharaoh to bring my people, the Israelites, out of Egypt.” Moses knew very well that the Egyptians were holding the Israelites as captive slaves, and, the Egyptians would not easily let go of that slave labor. Moses said to God, “Who am I that I should go to Pharaoh, and bring the Israelites out of Egypt?” Then God said, “I will be with you.”

Moses tried to tell God that he could not rescue the Hebrew people from their oppressive slavery, but God told Moses that he could. And, beginning in chapter 12 of Exodus, Moses would. With God as life force support, Moses led a highly unlikely rescue of the Hebrew people from their oppressive slavery in Egypt.

And so, you too, can help to rescue someone who is in need...That person in need could be someone you have known for quite a while, like a relative or a friend. Or that person in need could be someone you just met. The hard part is recognizing that the person is in need. And, why is that? Because, we as humans, are programmed from an early age to pay attention to our needs first. Jesus knew this, which is why Jesus said in a round-about way in Matthew 16 that helping someone else is not only good for the person in need, it is really good for you.

Please carry in your heart the words of the apostle, Paul, and the great Olympian, Wilma Rudolph, and you will be able to better recognize that person in need – and recognize that moment to help. Everyone deserves some honor for the greatness that is inside each of us. But when you are helping, stay true to yourself. Remember, helping someone does not have to be as spectacular as with Wilma Rudolph and her mother. Rescuing someone does not have to involve a dramatic parting of the waters as it did with Moses and the enslaved Israelites. It can be something quite simple. Be that person who helps to reawaken someone’s spirit. Let someone know that they “could,” especially when those all around are saying “could not.” So go out there, and find that person who is lying down, and feeling bad, and feeling sorry for themselves. Pray to God for wisdom; pray to God for strength. And get out there, and, be a life force.

Amen.