

"G.O.A.T."
Mark 9:30-37
September 19, 2021
York Center Church of the Brethren
Pastor Christy Waltersdorff

You may have heard of a young woman named Simone Biles. She is a gymnast and has been wearing a specially made leotard for a couple of years. It's decorated with silver rhinestones in the shape of an animal. Does anyone know what the animal is? It's a goat. Now why in the world would Simone Biles be wearing an outline of the head of a goat on her competition leotards?

GOAT stands for "Greatest Of All Time." In an interview, Ms. Biles explained why she did it. "It was intended to hit back at the haters." How one of the greatest athletes in history could have haters is beyond me. But she does. There was a discussion between these haters on social media saying, "She thinks she is the greatest of all time. If she puts a goat on her leotard, it will make me so mad." So, she said, "That's a great idea!" And she did it. She told one reporter, "I don't think of myself as the G.O.A.T. and that is not why I wear a goat on my leo. It was kind of a joke in the beginning when I first wore it in 2019."

She continues to wear it, though, because she hopes that kids watching her will learn they don't have to be ashamed of being good at whatever they do. She has found that it's ok if everyone else says you are good at something, but if **you** say it then you are on an ego trip and are criticized. (This seems to be more of an issue for women than for men, hmmm.) She wants girls **and** boys to know that they can be proud of themselves and acknowledge their talents and gifts.

I think that's one reason why she is the G.O.A.T.

Simone Biles is the first woman gymnast to ever complete the Yurchenko double pike in competition. And when she did the judges refused to score it properly. They said they were afraid that if they rewarded her for that accomplishment then other young women might attempt it and get hurt because it is so difficult and dangerous. (Are you kidding me?)

Simone believes that they also lowered her score so she would not be allowed to dominate a sport that she very clearly already dominates.

Another reason I believe she is truly the G.O.A.T. is because of what she did- and what she didn't do- at the summer Covid Olympics in Tokyo. After qualifying in all of her events, she just felt as though something wasn't right. She experienced what gymnasts call "the twisties." It is a dangerous situation where they lose track of where their body is in the air as they vault and turn; they aren't sure where the floor is. So, she walked over to her coach and her trainer and said, "I am done. It isn't safe for me to continue." And she walked off that mat turning over the US gymnastics legacy to the other talented young women on her team. They won silver, and she modeled what it means to take care of yourself and your own mental health. She showed strength and integrity. That is a G.O.A.T.

What I believe really makes her the greatest of all time is what she did just this past week in Washington D.C. nowhere near a gymnastics mat. She, along with other top US gymnasts, McKayla Maroney, Maggie Nichols, and Aly Raisman, sat in front of the Senate Judiciary Committee and called out the FBI for ignoring the reports of sexual abuse by the USA Gymnastics doctor, Larry Nassar.

She looked right at the Director of the FBI and said that his agency had "served innocent children up to a pedophile on a silver platter." She spoke truth to power as she accused not only the FBI, but also USA Gymnastics and the United States Olympic and Paralympic Committee for allegedly covering up reports of his abuse--- for decades.

She told the committee, " *We suffered and continued to suffer because no one in power did what was necessary to protect us. I don't want another young gymnast or Olympic athlete to experience the horror I and hundreds of others have endured.*" And then she asked them , "*How much is a little girl worth?*"

What is especially infuriating for these young women is that even after gymnasts contacted the FBI to make their accusations, the law enforcement agency did NOTHING for a year- allowing seventy more girls and young women to be assaulted.

To date more than 250 women have accused Nassar of sexual abuse. In a 2018 trial, he was convicted and is serving 40 to 175 years in prison on sex assault

charges on top of a 60-year sentence for child pornography. The courage Simone and the other women showed as they testified in front of a panel of mostly white, older men in power, is what makes her and the others the greatest.

Simone Biles, the most decorated gymnast in history at the age of 24, with 24 world championships and seven Olympic medals in her possession, spent her younger years in foster care with her four siblings. Their biological parents struggled with drug and alcohol addiction and couldn't care for them. The children often went hungry. Simone and her younger sister were eventually adopted by their maternal grandparents and to this day she calls them, "mom and dad" and credits them with her success.

This young woman has exhibited a greatness of character that the disciples of Jesus could only dream about. And dream about it they did. And argue- boy did they argued about it.

In the 9th chapter of Mark's Gospel, we find Jesus and his disciples on their way to Jerusalem and to the cross. They passed through Galilee, where it all began, and he continued to tell them about what was going to happen. For the second time he told them, *"The Son of Man (referring to himself) is going to be betrayed and murdered. After three days he will rise again."*

Granted, that is a lot to take in. Of course, the disciples were confused and afraid but instead of asking Jesus for clarification they argued with each other. And of all things, they argued about who was the greatest. Jesus talks about his suffering and death, and they argue over who was going to get his corner office after he was gone.

Even though they had been with him for three years they still could not quite wrap their minds around the reality of Jesus's true identity. They thought the Messiah of God would come with power and might to kick the hypocrites out of the temple and to send the Roman army running scared. They thought they knew who he was. But they really didn't.

He was the Messiah who turned the priorities of the world upside down, the One who tipped the scales of power in favor of the powerless. He didn't sit down to dinner with kings and princes, but with women and children. The disciples wanted to ride on the coattails of his status- they wanted to bask in his glory and privilege.

They wanted all of the good stuff and none of the bad. But they were in for a big surprise.

I have to believe, though, that they did have a smidgen of an understanding of who he really was because when he asked them, "What were you discussing on the road?" They were silent. Obviously, they knew that their topic of conversation would not meet with his approval. Perhaps they were ashamed to tell him that they were fighting over the disciple-of-the-year award.

When they arrived in Capernaum, he gathered them around him and showed them a living parable. He reached out to a child who was in the room and held the little one on his lap. "This is what you should aspire to," he told them. They were no doubt confused because in their culture children were basically invisible. They were the property of their fathers with no power, no voice, no value. They were nobodies with a capital "N."

With this one act, an act that we perform with joy, one that I have missed greatly during this pandemic- embracing a child, Jesus showed his true colors, his true **subversive** colors. He showed his disciples that he was the kind of Messiah, the Son of God, who reached out to those who lived below the bottom of the ladder of success.

As he delighted in the presence of that little one, he told the big ones, "If you embrace a child, if you reach out to the nobodies, if you lift up those who have been thrown away by society then you are embracing me. You are reaching out to me. You are lifting me up. And not just me," he said, "But you are reaching out to God as well."

Perhaps the disciples were hoping that hanging out with Jesus would make them look better; maybe increase their own status and prestige. But Jesus has a different idea. *"If you want to follow me, pick up your cross and get in line. If you want to follow me, put on your apron and start waiting on tables. If you want to follow me, get down on your knees and wash the feet of those people you can't stand. To love the ones that the high and mighty call unlovable is to love God."*

This message from Jesus isn't any easier for us to hear today than it was for the disciples all those years ago. They sat there in that room, watching Jesus smile at the little kid that they hadn't even noticed was in the room, and they knew they had messed up. It never would have occurred to them to want to be a nobody. They were Jewish men, after all, they were supposed to be pretty far up there on the Palestinian pyramid of importance. It never would have occurred to them to go to the back of the line rather than pushing their way to the front. And I don't think it occurs to us very often either.

According to Bethany Seminary Professor, Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, their lesson that day was this: discipleship means welcoming and caring for those who are of least concern to others. She writes, *"If we cherish the priesthood of all believers, Jesus proposes something far more radical: the **servanthood** of all believers. Christ insists that it is not important to be recognized by others but to **recognize** others, especially those who are most often overlooked."* (1)

I appreciate these stories that show us how confused and unprepared, how human, the disciples were because it gives me hope- for me- and for you. They couldn't learn everything Jesus wanted them to know in three years. Discipleship takes a lifetime, even if you are actually sitting at the feet of Jesus. We are always on this journey with Jesus and realizing that is what contributes to greatness as a Christian. Accepting and even celebrating that we can never really be - we should never even want to be- the number one disciple, or the best person of faith in the whole world, gives us the freedom to be the person and the disciple God calls us to be. And I find that to be a great relief!

Who are the invisible ones in our world today? Who don't we see- who do we choose not to see? Immigrants? Refugees? Those without homes? Addicts? Children with shabby clothing and runny noses? Those living with mental illness? People who are differently-abled?

Barbara Brown Taylor offers this insight . *"Whoever wants to be first must be last of all and servant of all," he told them. Then he showed them what he meant by taking a little child in his arms. They wanted to know who was the greatest, so he showed them: twenty-six inches tall, limited vocabulary, unemployed, zero net worth, nobody. God's agent. The last, the least of all."* (2)

Any questions?

Here is the hard lesson the disciples learned, and maybe we will learn it too. If we want to welcome God into our lives, then there is no one whom we may safely ignore.

If we want to be a part of God's family, this is how we do it: go find someone who matters to no one else, put your arms around them and say hello to God.

May it be so. Amen.

End Notes:

- *PREACHING THE GOSPEL OF MARK: PROCLAIMING THE POWER OF GOD, Dawn Ottoni Wilhelm, Westminster John Knox Press.2008. p. 169.*
- *"Last Of All," from BREAD OF ANGELS, Barbara Brown Taylor, Cowley, 1997. P.134.*