

Message: A Divine Invitation**“Transform the lives of people.”¹**

Do those words sound familiar? Well, I have news: they aren’t from the Bible. Those are the words of International Olympic Committee (IOC) President Thomas Bach during Friday night’s opening ceremony in Rio. One of the goals of the IOC is to “transform the lives of people . . . through unity, embracing our shared humanity, love and acceptance.”² The power and presence of sport is something that gives confidence and motivation to youth and people of all ages, across the world. Bach sees an “Olympic spirit of solidarity” at work, and as evidence, the IOC created the first Refugee Olympic Team. Praise God!

The IOC president's message to more than 27 million viewers focused on the importance of living peacefully together in a “world of crisis, mistrust, and uncertainty.”³ Referring to the 10,000 athletes gathered, Bach said, “In this Olympic world, we see that the values of our shared humanity are stronger than the forces which want to divide us.”⁴ Through the next two weeks, the athletes who live in Olympic village and millions of viewers around the world will be captivated by the experience of watching people passionately giving their all, holding nothing back. The experiences we share will change our lives and impact all aspects of our society and culture.

The Olympic games are a perfect analogy for life as a disciple of Christ. God prepares the way, Christ fills our hearts with passion and the Holy Spirit gives us the energy we need to live a rich spiritual life, giving our all, holding nothing back. God’s love helps us live in a world filled with stress, conflict and division (Galatians 5:19-21a). No matter where we were born, what language we speak, what political views we hold, what our gender, sexuality or lifestyle may be, God welcomes all who come seeking to know God’s love and to share that love with others. God welcomes us into community, which means God welcomes us into relationship with one another.

¹ [2016-08-01-Opening-speech-IOC-Session-Rio-de-Janeiro-IOC-President-Bach-english.pdf](#)

² *Ibid*

³ [/www.bustle.com/articles/177142-thomas-bachs-speech-had-a-message-that-everybody-should-hear](#)

⁴ *Ibid*

What’s happening at the Olympics is only a shadow of what God’s children can do when they gather with the passion of Jesus Christ filling their heart, mind and spirit. Can you imagine that?

The Olympic athletes are gathered together, regardless of their backgrounds, beliefs and differences. A common passion fills their hearts, their minds are focused on the same prize and their bodies are prepared and ready to work, seeking to win a gold medal. God gathers us together in communities of faith in a similar manner, but for a different reason. When we gather together and God’s love fills our hearts, our differences don’t matter: we know we’re loved. When we gather together and our minds are focused on knowing Christ, we find it easier to get through life each day: we’re filled with hope. When we gather together and our bodies are ready to serve, we find it easy to share the good news of God’s love: we live by faith. When we’re gathered together, we’re stronger than when we are apart. Faith, hope and love transform us and, in turn, impact the lives of those we love.

The Olympic athletes are making new friends, strengthening existing relationships; some are making bonds that will last a lifetime. Those who follow Jesus with all their heart, mind and strength do the same. We can’t help it. It’s because the way we’re made. Humans are made in God’s image, created to be in relationship with God and one another. God made us different from one another, giving us spiritual gifts, skills and experiences so that, when we come together, we can help each other and make our community stronger. We’re separate persons, living our own lives, but doing so within a community designed to love and care for us, and for others. That’s what it means to be a disciple, one who follows Christ.

Discipleship isn’t just learning about Jesus. It’s about becoming *like* Jesus. The grace of Christ is freely given, but it requires a commitment. In Matthew 5:13-16 Jesus said, *“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.”* Later, Jesus said, *“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on*

the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”

Following Jesus comes with a cost. We have to give up our “me-first” attitude and behavior, and intentionally put Christ and others first. Now, I don’t know about you, but that’s hard for me. If you think it’s easy, then I invite you to take a good, hard look at how much of your time, money and ability you’re giving to the Lord. Then give what you’re holding back and see what happens.

If you do make the commitment, sticking to it’s hard because, in time, we tend to forget the passion and focus more on the obligation. We tend to get so focused on the nature of our work that we fall into one of two traps: either we forget to look at see where God is leading or we don’t look at work as the means God has given us to share in the harvest. And yet work is where we can really shine. Unfortunately, we forget to invest in spiritual treasures, which are good works when they lead to new relationships. Instead, we tend to act just like the rich man of Luke 12:16-21, who only wanted to “*eat, drink and be merry.*” Rather than investing our time and money in ways that grow our faith and help us grow spiritually, we often spend our time pursuing earthly wealth, fame and power. When that happens, we lose our ability to share the message that God’s love is freely given with others. We’re like salt that has lost it’s taste. All you can do is throw it out, get more and start over.

It’s not too late us to start over. Here’s a simple self-assessment. Assume you’re put on trial and asked to prove to the judge you’re a Christian. The only two items of evidence you can show are your Day-Timer and checkbook. How would you stand?

Those who follow Jesus need a clear focus. Discipleship doesn’t happen through email, cold calls or things sent to us. Discipleship happens through relationships, when we get into the messiness of each other’s lives. Discipleship happens when we turn to God in those times when we have disagreements, when we’re disappointed with one another, when we feel like we’re taken for granted or disrespected. Discipleship happens when we lose our job, when cancer comes, when

the relationship sours, yet we know we have brothers and sisters at church we can call who will listen, help out, give us a hug or hold our hand when we need it. Following the path of Christ during those times is difficult. Even the most spiritually mature can fail, falter and be in need of repentance and forgiveness. The good news: God is waiting for us to ask and wants to give us the grace we need to succeed.

Today, I invite you to join us, to be in relationship with Jesus and those gathered at Corona UMC. For some of you, that may mean confessing whatever it is that separates you from God, asking Jesus for forgiveness and praying for him to come into your life. For others, it may mean getting off the fence. If you’ve been church shopping, I invite you to take a chance. I would be happy to speak with you after the service, you can leave a message with one of the ushers or you can call to talk during the week. For a few, it may mean you are willing to give us your trust and to re-commit yourself to attending church regularly, reading your Bible and praying. For some, it may mean joining a leadership team. For all of you, I hope it means you will join a small group, where you can grow spiritually and in relationship with others throughout the week.

I invite you to pray with me:

Jesus, I confess to you that I have withheld myself from you. Forgive me for all of my transgressions, all that I have done to separate myself from you. I accept you as my Lord and Savior. Fill me and cleanse my heart and mind, make of me a new creation. I commit myself to you in your holy and precious name. Amen.

If you prayed that prayer of salvation, I have good news: Jesus Christ has forgiven your sins and broken the power sin and death had over you. Rejoice for you are God’s child. You are loved. Please let me or someone else know so we can celebrate with you.

To God be the glory, amen!

Ezekiel 34:1-6 (NRSV)

The word of the LORD came to me: Mortal, prophesy against the shepherds of Israel: prophesy, and say to them - to the shepherds: Thus says the Lord GOD: Ah, you shepherds of Israel who have been feeding yourselves! Should not shepherds feed the sheep? You eat the fat, you clothe yourselves with the wool, you slaughter the fatlings; but you do not feed the sheep. You have not strengthened the weak, you have not healed the sick, you have not bound up the injured, you have not brought back the strayed, you have not sought the lost, but with force and harshness you have ruled them. So they were scattered, because there was no shepherd; and scattered, they became food for all the wild animals. My sheep were scattered, they wandered over all the mountains and on every high hill; my sheep were scattered over all the face of the earth, with no one to search or seek for them.

Matthew 5:13-16 (NRSV)

“You are the salt of the earth; but if salt has lost its taste, how can its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything, but is thrown out and trampled under foot.

“You are the light of the world. A city built on a hill cannot be hid. No one after lighting a lamp puts it under the bushel basket, but on the lampstand, and it gives light to all in the house. In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that they may see your good works and give glory to your Father in heaven.”