Nympha, Euodia and Syntyche

Colossians 4:15-16, Philippians 4:1-7

Buckingham Church

August 1, 2021

Rochelle A. Stackhouse

If any of you are Olympics fans, you will know about what happened with Simone Biles this past week. In case you have not heard of her, Simone is widely understood to be the GOAT (Greatest Of All Time) as a gymnast. She has appeared in two previous Olympics and won numerous medals at home and abroad. But the pressure to continue to be the GOAT is tremendous on anyone, let alone a 24-year-old, and this week she withdrew from the team and individual all-around competitions because her stress threatened her ability to perform without injury. I give her credit for that self-awareness.

And I got angry when the news commentators said things like “without Simone, the US women’s team had to settle for silver.” ***Settle for silver?*** How about saying that the US women won a silver medal! Because Simone Biles was not the US Team. She was part of it, an important leader, but there were 4 other women out there, one of whom had to step into her place at the last minute, all of whom are extremely talented and won silver medals! Gymnastics is a team sport, and all the members of the team are there to do their best, support each other in joys and struggles, and care for each other’s well-being. And Simone has continued to do that for her team, even while not competing.

Christianity is a team activity, also. I don’t think I can stress that enough! Sometimes being a Christian is talked about as though it is all “Jesus and me,” and my individual salvation is the only important thing on which I need to focus. But Jesus did not teach or live that. Though he was the GOAT himself, he did not work alone, but gathered 12 close associates as well as dozens of others who worked with him. He trained and sent out over 70 people at one point to teach and preach and heal at one point. Both before his crucifixion and before his ascension, Jesus made sure that his followers gathered together for support. People came together in churches in people’s homes from the very beginning of the movement because Peter, Paul and other leaders knew that you can’t be baptized and then be expected to live as Jesus taught all by yourself! Living and loving in the image of Christ is not easy in this world, never has been, and can’t be done alone. As you know, just trying to figure out what the Bible means takes a village! And when we have times of illness in body, mind, or spirit, we can count on someone to pick up our slack and to help nurture us back to health.

In the book of Acts, Paul’s letters, and other writings in the New Testament, we read the names of dozens of women and men who took on the ministry of spreading the gospel and caring for the faithful. We read about three of them today. Nympha had a church in her house, which usually meant she was its leader. Euodia and Syntyche were such important leaders that Paul wanted his friends to help them get over a disagreement they had with each other for the health of the church. And I could have chosen other women who are named in the post-gospel writings: Phoebe (the only woman to whom Paul gives the title “Deacon”), Priscilla (who apparently traveled with Paul, along with her husband, Aquila), Lydia, Persis, Julia, Tryphena, Tryphosa, Junia, Chloe, Lois, Eunice, Dorcas (also called Tabitha), Damaris, and Apphia. All leaders. As well as men named as members and leaders in the churches founded by Paul and others. From the very beginning, and as part of its DNA, the Christian faith is a team activity.

In Paul’s letter to the Philippians, where he urges Euodia and Syntyche to sort things out for the sake of the gospel, Paul lays out his hopes for how they will live out their lives as faithful children of God. “Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me.” Paul sets the bar high for the folks in Philippi. Although he absolutely knows they are not perfect, that they have made and will make mistakes, Paul has confidence that with leaders like Euodia and Syntyche healing their conflicts and working together, the Philippian Church can make an impact for good on their city, and on the world.

Neither Jesus nor the work of the early churches were ever about personal salvation. They were about feeding the hungry, helping the prisoners, advocating for the outcast, welcoming the stranger, healing the sick, loving God and loving their neighbors. That takes a team, not just one person. And although over the centuries the institutional church has often made mistakes and sometimes been destructive, and though its form is evolving even now, we still need other Christians to help us live the challenging life of love to which Jesus calls us.

One of my favorite old hymns is called “I Sing a Song of the Saints of God” by a woman named Lesbia Scott. I love it because it kind of subverts the standard Christian way of talking about saints as folk who were the GOAT and set the bar so high none of us could ever reach it. I can’t be Mother Teresa, so why should I try. But Scott writes this in her delightful hymn:

“They (the saints) lived not only in ages past, there are hundreds of thousands still/the world is bright with the joyous saints who love to do Jesus’ will/You can meet them in school, or in lanes, or at sea, in church or in trains or in shops or at tea/For the saints of God are just folk like me, and I mean to be one, too.”

At the end of Paul’s letter to the Philippians, he writes, “Greet every saint in Christ Jesus. The friends who are with me greet you. All the saints greet you.” At the beginning of the letter to the Colossians, Paul writes “To the saints and faithful brothers and sisters in Christ in Colossae.” He would address us as “the saints in Glastonbury.” We may not be the GOAT individually, but together, saints, we are called, gifted, and privileged to serve Jesus. We are a team the world desperately needs. Amen.