



Some of my closest friends growing up would partake of cross country in the fall and track and field in the spring for God-knows-what reason. Some thought it was fun to run three miles at a time and then a few months later, do so around a track however many laps to equal so many hundreds of meters, and then add in some hurdle hindrances along the way for a few of those races. Again, all done for God knows what reason. But, because of them, I paid a little more attention and gained a little more appreciation for the Olympian Michael Johnsons and the Usain Bolts and the Marion Joneses and the Jackie Joyner-Kersees, some of the most mind-boggling athletes of my generation. And yet, their personal triumphs

still pale in comparison to another runner's story, one who died 45 years ago tomorrow, drawing to a close a life that made humanity fall in love all the more with hope.

Although born in the South, he spent his formative years in the Fairfax neighborhood of Cleveland, about 15 miles northeast of here. He won events on the national level in high school, broke world records in college while attending the scarlet and gray establishment in Columbus. The following year he had a decision to make: whether to make the trek across the Atlantic to participate in the Games of the XI Olympiad, and not just having to keep travel complications in mind and wanting to ensure his family with nine siblings were cared for, but because at the destination was a growing movement brutally emphasizing a certain kind of human superiority, one of which the Clevelander was certainly not a part of whatsoever.

Nevertheless, he went, for God knows what reason, going to a place that would not be interested in embracing him at all. And not only did he make the trip. Not only did he run. He set Olympic and world records in multiple races and won four gold medals, all in front of the man who was trying to convince an entire world that a certain kind of humanity was vastly superior than the rest. Evidently, Jesse Owens missed the memo and proved yet again that talents and gifts and abilities, including from the Divine, could never be limited to a select few.

That story is more than powerful enough on its own, but one of his winning events was the long jump, an immense test of balance and coordination and timing. Owens struggled in his early attempts that day, and then a man from the host country, who should not have been speaking with him at all, went over and offered some advice to his rivaling athlete to aid in the final jump that ended up defeating the German with the near-defiant hospitality. Luz Long and Jesse Owens shockingly embraced each other after the American won the gold, and after all was said and done, when the two could relax and lay on the field with the biggest smiles on their faces, it would become one of the most treasured photographs in the history of the Olympic games: a moment when in spite of what the supposedly superior leaders would say how the world should operate, would instead err on the side of kindness and compassion and love and basic human respect.

The 32nd Psalm reminds us of the most nourishing power of forgiveness, including of the times when we do not always live up to the whole "loving our neighbor as ourselves," across the board. This whole season of Lent is also meant to be a time for us to dig further into our own personal awareness, recognizing the effect of our words and actions on others that may not always be so filled with compassion to say the least. And so the church does its best to ensure we provide the time and space to say out loud our shortcomings and then hear the grace that keeps on getting offered to us for God only knows what reason beyond our human comprehension.

However, we Lutherans aren't always the best for what should come next in the follow-up to whole forgiveness thing; that of repentance. Far too many believe that's more so for our Roman Catholic siblings in Christ for their "Hail Mary's" and "Our Father's" to be done after their personal confession time, but as the Psalmist reminds us of the mercy that embraces us, it's not only to ensure that we are still loved in spite of the mistakes made; it's also to embrace us as we try to do a little better the next time. Granted, it won't affect how much God loves us. It won't mess with the eternal state of our soul, but we still try to do a little better because more than enough children of God are desperately yearning for a little more kindness, a little more compassion, a little more love, for more images of basic human respect. They're yearning for people who in spite of an overwhelming message of ensuring superiority, will always err on the side of the very Gospel of Jesus Christ himself.

Long ago, it was brought to life on the edges of an Olympic track, at a time and place when the embracing of those at all different from the other would not be accepted at all. Not only did Jesse Owens miss the memo, so did Luz Long. Owens would later say, "It took a lot of courage for him to befriend me in front of [that crowd]... You can melt down all the medals and cups I have and they wouldn't be a plating for the twenty-four karat friendship that I felt for Luz Long at that moment." A moment when no matter how captivating the message was from the supposedly mighty human leaders, thankfully, for God most certainly knows what holy reason, the Gospel prevailed. It always has, it always will: today, tomorrow, and forever. And for that Greatest News of all, we most certainly give thanks to God, indeed! Amen!