

Why discipleship is not like the Olympics

By [Debra Dean Murphy](#)

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There are lots of ways to talk about the relationship between sports and religion.

The opening scene of [Bull Durham](#) comes to mind. As does the cultic quality of America's [obsession](#) with football.

Sport as the center of personal and communal piety has a long history in many cultures, with the U.S. perhaps—to keep the competition motif alive here—winning the prize for the world's most zealous devotees of the faith.

It works the other way around, too: Athletics as a central trope for describing the life of doctrinal religion. St. Paul, with his love of [running and boxing metaphors](#), comes readily to mind.

And now with the 2012 Summer Olympics in high gear, the high drama of sport - and its inevitable associations with religious faith - are even more present in our lives.

Mostly we see this in athletes who acknowledge God when asked about their skill and success. This is not a new phenomenon but we can thank (or blame) Tim Tebow for elevating it to new levels in recent years.

There's always the prickly problem of crediting God with athletic victory. Following her stunning performance this past week, American gymnast [Gabby Douglas](#) said: "I give all the glory to God. It's kind of a win-win situation. The glory goes up to him and the blessings fall down on me."

It's hard to know if she meant to imply that God gave her the gold. I'd like to think she didn't mean that. I'd like to think instead that this young, charismatic gymnast understands her athleticism as a gift to be grateful for, and proper gratitude means stewarding such a gift, taking responsibility for it, doing all in her power to nurture and develop it and, perhaps most importantly, taking exquisite pleasure in it. This way of thinking about God's "blessings" could mean that the most "religious" thing

an athlete does – elite or not, amateur or professional - is simply to be beautiful in his or her giftedness. God-talk not necessary.

In the Christian life generally we're to nurture and develop and take joy in whatever gifts or graces we've been blessed with. Scripture speaks in various ways about the various gifts God gives God's people. Yet always the emphasis is on the giving of gifts to edify the whole community, "to equip the saints for the work of ministry, for building up the body of Christ," as this week's appointed (Protestant) [epistle lesson](#) has it.

Yet, individualists that we are, our tendency is to think of our gifts and talents as private possessions for self-expression, even self-aggrandizement rather than as shared treasure for the good of the whole. And in our sports-obsessed culture, it is interesting that the gifts in our children we seem most intent to nurture are athletic ones. Before our children can barely walk and often whether or not any native athletic talent is evident, we parents, with laser-like focus, spend tremendous amounts of time, energy, and money in the hopes of . . . of what? that one day our uniquely gifted child will stand on an Olympic podium or wear a championship ring?

That our sons and daughters might have other gifts worthy of such time and attention seems less likely to occur to us.

But what if a child shows evidence of the gift, say, of wisdom or of counsel (right judgment) or fortitude (courage) or understanding? (Four of the seven gifts of the Holy Spirit outlined by Thomas Aquinas in his [Summa Theologica](#)). What if we focused our attention on helping children, even children not our own, steward such gifts?

When we baptize persons, in fact, we promise to nurture them in the life of faith, to support and encourage the gifts they've been given as they seek to live fully into their baptismal vows. The idea seems to be that it takes a community to discern one's gifts, and it takes a community for those gifts to be fully realized for faithful witness in the world.

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Olympic athletes are a joy to behold. As a lifelong swimmer, I'm completely in awe of Missy Franklin and many of the other supremely gifted athletes who move with such power and beauty in the water. And I'm now looking forward to enjoying the

gifts of the fleet of foot, as track and field takes center stage this coming week.

But I'm mindful, especially as the words from Ephesians chapter 4 were read and heard in worship this past weekend, that the Christian faith works with a different grammar, a different set of assumptions about gifts and how we use them for God's glory and for the good of Christ's body. Stewarding gifts in community, for the community, and for the sake of the world is part of the slow, patient work of Christian discipleship. It is mostly unglamorous work, but necessary and holy work nonetheless as we seek to

grow up in every way into him who is the head, into Christ, from whom the whole body, joined and knit together by every ligament with which it is equipped, as each part is working properly, promotes the body's growth in building itself up in love (Eph. 4:15-16).

That's it really: it's about love. Love for each other, love for God and love for the world God has made.

Which can look pretty odd in a culture where sports – much of it cutthroat, commercial, ruthlessly competitive – is the dominant religion.

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