

THE HIDDEN TREASURE

Scriptures: Matthew 13:44-46, Matthew 6:19-21

Last Wednesday night I watched the women's downhill from the Winter Olympics in Vancouver, B. C. The downhill is an amazing race. The skiers go pretty much straight down hill as fast as they can hurtling over bumps, sometimes going as much as 150 feet through the air before landing at speeds approaching 65 miles an hour. An American, Lindsey Vonn, won the race by less than a second.

After the race she was interviewed by NBC news, and with tears streaming down her face she said, "I've given up everything for this." And it was true. As a child she enrolled in a special ski racing school near their home in Minneapolis. As a youth she commuted from her family in Minneapolis to a training program at Vail, CO, until in the late 1990s her whole family moved to Vail, so she could continue her training. She then went to Austria to train with an Austrian ski coach. At the 2006 Winter Olympics in Torino she crashed on a training run and was evacuated by helicopter to a hospital. But she competed the next day and finished 8th. She won the overall World Cup Championships in 2008 and 2009 before a severely bruised shin almost knocked her out of the Vancouver Olympics. But she competed anyway, clearly favoring her right leg, to the point that crossing the finish line she was almost skiing on one ski.

I am awestruck by the amount of dedication that Lindsey Vonn gave to this one race. As she said, she gave up everything for a race that lasted 1 minute and 44 seconds.

It reminds me of something the apostle Paul said in his first letter to the Corinthians. He said, "Athletes exercise self-control in all things; they do it to receive a perishable wreath, but we an imperishable one" (I Corinthians 9:25).

Winning a gold medal in the Olympics is a huge deal, but what does it really mean in the grand scheme of things? I mean, what if Lindsey Vonn had fallen going over a hill, as some of the other competitors did, as Lindsey Jacobellis did in the semi-finals of snowboard cross?

Lindsey Jacobellis was a lot like Lindsey Vonn. She grew up going to a private boarding school in Vermont devoted to training skiers. After graduating in 2003, she spent all her time training and competing in World Cup and Winter X Game championships leading up to this Winter Olympics. But in the semi-final she landed just a little too far forward on her board going over the first jump—just a slight imbalance. But at those speeds she slid off the course, and just like that, her Olympics were over. All that work gone in a matter of seconds. What did it mean if it could all be wiped out just like that?

Let's go back to our second scripture reading. In Matthew 13 Jesus tells two parables not found in any other gospel. He says, "The kingdom of heaven is like a treasure hidden in a field, which someone found and hid; then in his joy he goes and sells all that he has and buys that field."

There are two obvious points in this parable. First, the kingdom of heaven is a hidden treasure. Its value is not obvious.

Winning a gold medal at the Olympics is not a hidden treasure. By now people all over the world know the name of Lindsey Vonn, if they didn't already. Soon she will appear on endorsements for all kinds of products. In fact she already has. An Olympic gold medal is not a hidden treasure. It is broadcast all over the world.

In contrast teaching Sunday School does not get much attention. Helping a five year-old learn about Jesus will not get you any product endorsements. Neither will cooking dinner for some youth or nailing together some boards at a Habitat House or making lap robes for people in wheel chairs or sitting in a pew on Sunday morning singing hymns. No one is going to interview you because you were here this morning. No one is going to ask you to endorse their product. The kingdom of heaven is a hidden treasure. It won't make you famous. It won't make you rich. Except in rare cases it won't even make you popular with the opposite sex.

But it is worth everything you've got. That is the second point Jesus makes. The kingdom of heaven is worth everything you've got. There is nothing in your life—nothing!—that is more important than your relationship to God and God's kingdom. Why? Because one day everything else will come to an end.

I wonder how long Lindsey Vonn will be remembered. I say this, because there is a women's downhill Olympic bronze medalist living right here in Spokane. Did you know that? Her children went to Mullan Road School with my children, and one night at a Cub Scout meeting she brought her bronze medal that she won in the women's downhill at the 1972 Winter Olympics in Sapporo, Japan. Her name then was Susan Corrock. Her name now is Suzy Luby. No one these days is asking her for product endorsements. No one is blogging about her accomplishments on the internet. If you ask her, she will tell you that it is a thrill to win an Olympic medal, but I think she would also say that the really important things that have happened in her life are the things that have happened since then: marriage, children, friendships, and all the relationships and involvements she has had over the course of a lifetime.

An Olympic medal is a visible treasure but a passing one. The kingdom of heaven is a hidden treasure but a lasting one. It's like a merchant in search of fine pearls, Jesus says. There are a lot of pearls out there you could buy. But many of them are fake. You can give your soul to things that will turn to dust: houses, boats, cars, businesses, careers, reputations, even your own body. You can invest your whole life in pearls that will turn to powder. But there is one pearl that is worth the price, and that is a new relationship to God in a new world that will last forever.

And that is why it is worth everything we've got. Lindsey Vonn said, "I've given up everything for this." Her family even moved across the country to a new town so she could train. What if we did something even remotely like that for the kingdom of heaven? What if a family pulled their child out of a sport in order to train for the kingdom of God? What would happen if someone told their child's coach, "I'm sorry. My child cannot play on your team on Sunday

morning. We have something more important we have to do. We're training for God's kingdom." Would people think they are nuts? Probably.

I will tell you one thing: training for the kingdom of God will not get you any publicity. You will not be interviewed by NBC for going to Sunday School. You will not appear on a box of Wheaties because you gave to the One Great Hour of Sharing. You will not be mentioned in blogs all over the world because you stood here this morning and sang of the mercies of the Lord. But I tell you, when all the Olympic medals are forgotten, when all of the products that have ever been endorsed by Olympic athletes have disappeared, along with the athletes themselves, those who sing of the mercies of the Lord will still be singing. Those who celebrate the faithfulness of God will still be celebrating.

The kingdom of heaven is a hidden treasure, but it is a treasure worth everything you have.

And here is the best news. You can lose an Olympic medal in an instant. One little slip like Lindsey Jacobellis in the snowboard cross, one little stumble in figure skating, one little wobble in the luge and you can lose an Olympic medal. In fact in the case of the luge you can even lose your life. But a relationship to God depends not on your perfection but on God's faithfulness. And that is why we gather here in this unimpressive act called worship. There are no media cameras broadcasting what we do here this morning. No one is going to be impressed that you were here. I'm sorry. The kingdom of heaven is a hidden treasure, but it is a treasure that will still be around when all the other treasures in the world are gone.

- Ken Onstot
February 21, 2010