

From Rivalry to Salvation
The Seventh Sunday of Easter
Sunday, June 2, 2019
The Rev. Paul McLain

'Do not harm yourself, for we are all here.' In the Name of the Father, Son, and Holy Spirit. *Amen.*

The 1981 movie *Chariots of Fire* tells the story of two very different men. Harold Abrahams was the son of a wealthy financier. He went to the best prep schools in England, and did his collegiate studies at Cambridge. Despite being in the best possible educational settings, Harold could see in a dismissive glance his way, a muffled whisper among his classmates, and in the occasional cutting remarks that he was perceived as something less than the others. You see, Harold was Jewish. And he learned the hard way that the corridors of power in British society were reserved for Protestants. He resolved to be academically brilliant and to be the fastest runner at any track meet. Harold saw running as a weapon – a weapon against prejudice towards him for being a Jew.

Eric Liddell was born in China, the son of devout Christian missionary parents. He too had a gift for athletics. Eric was a star rugby player and ran track for Edinburgh University and for Scotland. He became known as the Flying Scotsman. After his matches and track meets, he would speak to groups, especially young people, about how the Christian faith is much like running a race, a metaphor the apostle Paul often used. Eric said that when he ran, he could feel God's pleasure. He saw running as a way to share the good news of Jesus.

Harold and Eric met for the first time at a track meet. The tension in the locker room between them could be cut with a knife. Their race was neck and neck. But near the tape, Harold glanced over to look for Eric. That glance cost him just enough momentum such that Eric raced right past him and won the race. It was the first time Harold had ever lost. He was dejected and spent the afternoon sitting in the stands, replaying in his mind every nanosecond of the race.

Later, a classmate let Harold know that he had been selected for the 1924 British Olympic team. The classmate told Harold that Eric was selected also, and added, "So - rivals under the same flag?" Harold responded, "I can't wait."

Our scripture passage from Acts is all about rivalries. When Paul removed a spirit from a slave woman who was being exploited as a fortune teller, her masters retaliated. They dragged Paul and Silas before the magistrates, and accused them not of what they did, depriving them of income from their slave, but of multiple other serious charges.

As the English power brokers did to Harold Abrahams, the slave owners labeled Paul and Silas Jews with detest. The magistrates and the crowd stripped Paul and Silas and beat them. They threw them into jail. And their jailer did as he was ordered. He confined them in the innermost cell and tied their feet with chains so they could not move.

At midnight, as Paul and Silas were praying and singing hymns, a violent earthquake shook the prison. The doors flew open and their chains came loose! The jailer woke up and knew they had escaped. He took out a sword to die by suicide. And Paul shouted out, "Do not harm yourself, for we are all here."

Why did they stay? Their prayer had been answered. They were given this earthquake as a means of release. And what did the life of this jailer mean to them? After all, he was the last in a series of Roman rivals who had poured out cruel indignities on them all day long.

But something inside Paul and Silas prompted them to see past the rivalry of Jews and Romans. They somehow saw that this jailer was, at his heart, a human being just like them – a human being yearning for salvation. They stayed **for him**.

The jailer was so moved that he fell down to his knees. He asked, "Sirs, what must I do to be saved?" They introduced him to Jesus. Or maybe he introduced them to Jesus. Look at what he did for them. The jailer took them to his house in the middle of the night. He took out a cloth and lovingly washed their wounds. He and his whole family joined them by being baptized in the wee hours. And then he invited them to his table and served them breakfast.

In this former rival, they not only saw the face of God. They felt his healing touch. And they were all lifted up together to a heavenly realm where rivalries are no more, and where past hurts and distrust give way to the triumph of love.

Before Eric Liddell and Harold Abrahams embarked across the channel to Paris for the Olympic Games, Eric faced a spiritual crisis. His sister Jenny noticed that he was late for and even missed church events because he was so consumed with running and preparing for the Olympics. She called him on it.

And then, he learned that one of his preliminary events for running the 100 meter dash was scheduled on a Sunday. He had often preached to children about not playing rugby on Sundays in order to devote the day to the Lord. Now, his faith was put to the test. After much internal struggle and even after being called before an inquisition by the Prince of Wales, he resolved not to run on a Sunday.

A teammate then graciously made it possible for him to participate instead in another race, the 400 meter run. His rival, Harold Abrahams, went on to win the 100 meter dash. And one of the first in line to congratulate him was Eric Liddell.

My favorite scene in this or any movie was when Eric came up to shake Harold's hand. Their former rivalry melted as they smiled and looked into each other's eyes with deep and genuine admiration. Eric seemed to lift Harold up with his earnest handshake. And Harold held back tears as he looked upon Eric and saw in him a kindred spirit that went far beyond England or Scotland, far beyond Jew or Christian, far beyond athletics or anything else. They were now inextricably bound together for eternity. Later, Harold not only cheered for Eric as he won the 400 meter event, he joined his teammates in lifting Eric up on their shoulders in triumph.

On Thursday, we celebrated Ascension Day, a day in which we remember that Jesus was lifted up into heaven. One of our prayers for the Ascension is this:

“Grant, we pray, Almighty God, that as we believe your only-begotten Son our Lord Jesus Christ to have ascended into heaven, so **we** may also in heart and mind there ascend, and with him continually dwell.”

What I believe the Ascension is really all about is Jesus lifting us up with him, then summoning us to lift one another up, even and especially those we see as rivals. For only then do we all rise to the heavenly realm where together we find the true meaning of salvation. *Amen.*