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Proper 16B: John 6:56-69

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How many hours do you think the athletes who went to the Olympics this summer spent over the years preparing for those couple of weeks? Swimming, diving, rivalry, equestrian rowing, gymnastics, basketball. How many, if you added everyone's up together? Years. Decades. And maybe then add in the coaches, families and friends providing support in various ways? Centuries? Malcolm Gladwell famously (or annoyingly) claimed in his book *Outliers* it takes about 10,000 hours a week to become an expert at something— that's supposedly about 10 hours a week for 20 years in action. I know these athletes far exceeded that. Well, maybe not that one breakdancer from Australia, but pretty much everyone else. The Olympics are nothing if not a two week commercial about the value of repetition.

And no one was featured more in that two weeks than American gymnast Simone Biles. The best thing I heard that made me understand Simone Biles is that, entering this last Olympics, she had the same number of Olympic medals as all of the gymnasts on the Chinese men's team combined. The Chinese men's gymnastics team is actually quite good, too; nothing to sneeze at. As you have likely already heard, Simone has multiple skills named after her, skills on every apparatus. And as someone older than the typical Olympic gymnast—27— actually the entire US team was older than typical American gymnastics team at an average age of 22 years old, she had many, many repetitions of gymnastics skills under her belt.

For almost all of the Sundays in August, we've had unusually repetitive passages from John. It's honestly hard to tell the three apart. Over the last three weeks, over the course of less than thirty verses in John, we've heard the word *flesh* six times and *Father* seven times. *Eat* or *eats* eight times. The words we've heard the most are "bread" and either "live" or "lives," both of which we heard nine times, or once every 3.22 verses. I preached this passage in a much fuller, less thematic way last

week, so if you want or need that kind of sermon, it's on the website for you to read. Anyhow.

Like a musician practicing a piece, an athlete honing a skill, or a student mastering a problem, God uses repetition to try to connect with us. God reaches out to us, letting us know we are not alone, that we are loved, through music, through family members or friends, through a feeling of presence, through yes, the bread and the wine. I know some of you connect here, specifically in this building, which is lovely. What's also true is that church is meant to help us see the divine in other places, not only here. The good news is that Christ doesn't just seek us one and then give up, but again and again and again.

No one would ever argue that what happened to Simone Biles in Tokyo 2020 was due to lack of repetition. Just to refresh, four years ago, this behemoth of an athlete could no longer feel where her body was in the air as she was doing like triple twists. Something was not connecting for her in spite of the fact that she had more than put in the work, more than put in the reps. She withdrew, and she faced a deluge of criticism, just a barrage. She had to address destructive thought patterns and past traumas in therapy. She had to take time off. The repetition was enough until it wasn't.

Like Simone Biles, I wonder if sometimes we are being called to reconsider how we think about God might be approaching us. Part of our role as people attempting to follow Jesus is to learn more about who God is. Understanding a little more about who God is might help us map a bit more on how God might be present in the world today. And while bread is very ordinary, the other point that might now be harder to see is that it was unusual, and in the circles in which Jesus typically moved, even blasphemous for the divine to show up in something so ordinary we don't even think about it. Jesus repeatedly allied with unusual, often even offensive, people— folks like Zaccheaus the tax collector, a Samirtan woman at the well, and things, the primary example being not only bread but also the cross— an instrument of torture as a means of love.

So what would it be like to have a spirit of curiosity about how Jesus might be seeking us in the here and now? It's probably going to be kinda weird, perhaps even objectionable or somehow not what we want. Jesus did not agree to subvert all those expectations only once and never do it again. What might we be able to see if we have open hearts and open minds about what the Spirit's presence may look like not only in our own lives but also in the lives of this church, this community, the world? There is a lot of hand-wringing about the fact that churches have lower attendance than they used to, particularly in New England. St. Mary's is not an exception here. And I get it. If this place means something to you, as it does to many of you here today, you want to see it not only continue soldier on but also to thrive and flourish. But the God's honest truth is, we are not promised that everything will be easy or good all the time or even most of the time or actually at all. That was not, is not, nor will it ever be the promise, and anyone who tells you differently is selling something. God's promise is more simple and also more genuine than that, about presence, about love, about connection, and about purpose. Presence, love, connection, purpose.

The hymn we sang before the Gospel says, in the last verse, open thou our eyes, that we may see; be known to us in breaking of the Bread. God tries to connect with us repeatedly, in ways we've come to expect and in ways we do not, to let us know we are not alone and that we are loved.

Seek Jesus seeking you. Amen.