

## ***Torch Bearer!***

### A Confirmation Sermon

John 3:16-17; Matthew 5:43-48; Matthew 7:24-27

Great controversy has surrounded the Olympic Games which will be held in Beijing, China this summer – almost all of it centering on the issue of human rights. When the International Olympic Committee granted Beijing the 2008 Games back in 2001, the Chinese government made a promise that it would significantly improve its record on human rights. But as the Games have gotten nearer, Beijing has seemed intent to many observers on adopting a tougher line than ever before on the freedom of its citizens to speak their mind freely and independently. Indeed, China has stepped up its arrests of dissidents – either jailing those who are Chinese or deporting those who are not.

Perhaps the greatest part of the controversy centers on the status of Tibet which has been under Chinese occupation since the invasion of 1949. This spring the world has seen many protest marches by Tibetan monks in Lhasa, some of them violent. In retaliation, the Chinese government has cracked down hard on the protestors and accused the Dalai Lama of inciting the protests. While the Dalai Lama has become increasingly vocal in calling for an independent Tibet, he has steadfastly called for non-violent protests by the Tibetan people.

As a consequence, some predict that the 2008 Olympic Games may be the most controversial ever. Many of you will recall that the Rose Bowl parade itself was the occasion for a small protest against the inclusion of a Chinese float in the parade. Several hundred protestors assembled briefly at the beginning of the parade near Orange Grove and Colorado and parade organizers decided to have police walk on either side of the float to prevent violence. When the games open this summer, several world leaders have decided to not attend the Opening Ceremonies as a sign of their distress over the Chinese record on human rights.

In recent years, the carrying of the Olympic torch from Greece, the birthplace of the Olympics, to the host city has provided a drama that has been appreciated by people around the world. But this year the torch has been seen by thousands of people in many of the 20 cities it visited as a symbol of broken promises by the Chinese Olympics. Intended as a sign of harmony, this iconic Olympic symbol became instead a symbol of

controversy especially in cities like San Francisco, London, Paris, as well as in India and Indonesia. It was called by many the “flame of shame.”

But today on Confirmation Sunday here at First Church, the Olympic torch will arrive in China. It seems to me to be an occasion to reclaim one of the most important symbols of Christian faith for these thirteen young men and women who will be joining our congregation. For in the writings of sacred scripture, the torch, the flame, the light is a symbol of wisdom, purity, knowledge, justice and righteousness, and truth – all worthy and exemplary ideals to hold up to young men and women are preparing to carry the torch for Jesus Christ.

This week I heard an interview with David Mamet, the well-known Pulitzer Prize winning playwright and screen. He has authored a screenplay for a film premiering in a few weeks called “Redbelt.” Mamet says, “The film is about a man who is a very spiritual man whose expression of spirituality happens to be his devotion to the idea of a perfect fighter, of the perfect jujitsu fighter; and as such he attracts a lot of adherents.”<sup>1</sup> In the film, a skeptic says to this unusual, spiritual man, “You train people to fight.” The jiu-jitsu expert replies, “No, I train people to prevail. Everything has a force. Embrace it or deflect it.”<sup>2</sup>

Mamet says, “The point is not to fight; the point is to prevail. Conflict is a fact of life; we never get away from conflict. One of the philosophical ideas contained in jujitsu is why oppose force to force? What is your objective? Is your objective to bluster? Is your objective to exhaust yourself in endless fighting? Or is your objective to prevail over those forces to which you are opposed? There are many ways to win. One way is to walk away. Another one is take the force and turn it to the side, ...to divert the person’s energy. A third way is, if the other person seems intent on fighting, to let the other person exhaust himself until such time as you, in using as little force as possible, can subdue him.”

That is the essence, of course, of jiu-jitsu – “defending oneself without the use of weapons by using the strength and weight of an adversary to disable

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<sup>1</sup> “David Mamet Shows off His ‘Redbelt,’” *Day to Day*, National Public Radio, Interview with Alex Chadwick, Wednesday, April 30, 2008, <http://www.npr.org/templates/story/story.php?storyId=90100954>. To hear more of David Mamet’s thoughts, go to: <http://www.npr.org/templates/player/mediaPlayer.html?action=1&t=1&islist=false&id=90067938&m=90067912>.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.

him.” And it was fascinating to hear David Mamet describe this as a spiritual exercise.

He quoted Bob Dylan who “famously said, ‘You’ve got to serve somebody.’”<sup>3</sup> Mamet agrees and says, “There are no such things as atheists. Everybody believes in a high power, except that some people for a variety of reasons don’t choose to call that power ‘God.’ They might call it ‘a force in the universe’ or they might call it ‘fate.’ In fact some people who characterize themselves as very, very anti-religious call it ‘my bad luck.’ Nonetheless, these are all expressions of human need to understand that there is some force at work in the universe. One way that I think is a happier way to interact with this force is to find that force to which one can be reverent. A lot of people give devotions to good works. A lot of people give devotions to sports. But all of us are looking for something bigger than ourselves.”<sup>4</sup>

Young friends, I would suggest to you this morning that the church is in a fight for its very existence in the midst of a world that invests in houses built on sand more readily than those built on the rock. I would suggest to you this morning that each of you has to serve somebody, as Bob Dylan said. And with everything within me, I give thanks that you have chosen to believe in God as made known to us through Jesus Christ our Lord.

There’s nothing the matter with sports, fame, success, education, the sciences, the humanities, or anything else. But all human achievement makes so much more sense when it is offered in the service of the Creator who called us into being.

This morning, I am challenging you to carry the torch for Jesus Christ, to light the path for others who do not know him yet, to be a beacon for justice on behalf of those with no voice, and to be a sign that there is a great deal of power in this old church yet. Those of us who are older like to say, “Well, God’s not finished with me, yet.” What a joy it is for us to say, “God’s just getting started with you young people!”

You are our future, the representation of our hopes and dreams. You are the embodiment of the kingdom of God when you kneel this day and say, “I

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<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.

believe in God the Creator Almighty, I believe in Jesus Christ, the Son, and I believe in the Holy Spirit.”

Thanks be to God. Amen.