

Marathon

First Parish in Cambridge (homily) – March 29, 2020
Rev. Adam Lawrence Dyer

This last week the 2020 Olympics and Paralympic Games were postponed. For most of us it is a minor entertainment inconvenience that we won't be able to spend part of the months of August and September watching the thrill of victory and the agony of defeat. Here in the United States we have become addicted to the drama of athletic competition. Whether it is a race, a competition of strength or gymnastic skill, accuracy or endurance...we cannot get enough of watching someone push themselves to the limit of their capabilities. I'm a big fan of Olympic and Paralympic competition and I've seen up close and personal how hard the athletes train and how much they need to be of a single mind in order to reach their goals.

My heart goes out to them right now. The big names that we know from the Games are largely because they have been there multiple times. Someone like Serena Williams is a perennial favorite having been competing at the games for two decades. But she's the exception to the rule. For any number of reasons including finances and physical peak, most Olympic and Paralympic athletes only get to go once and they know that. Michael Phelps is an anomaly. Athletes prepare for years of their young lives aspiring to that singular opportunity to compete on the world stage. Most don't think about a medal, they just want the chance to test themselves. This is particularly true for athletes from small countries where they don't have big nationalized multi-billion-dollar training programs.

This is the reason that the men's and women's marathons always include the most diverse fields of the games. There is an equalizing beauty in there being no special equipment or course needed to train for running an extended distance. It is singularly a test of one's body against endurance. This is a perfect metaphor for what we are currently facing around the world right now.

Just to be clear, I believe there are many different kinds of "marathons" that aren't about running. I have a friend who will defend his doctoral dissertation after many years of research and stops and starts due to life. A marathon could be going through the process of bringing a new child into your home. It could also be getting through the brutal slog and uncertainty of treatment for cancer. Each of these and many other kinds of "marathons" require us to tap into something that our world of immediate gratification doesn't often ask of us. Discipline.

Olympic and Paralympic athletes understand discipline. They know that discipline is not just about eating right or training one move or skill repeatedly. Neither is discipline about denial. Discipline is really a posture in the world, a life approach that goes deep to the core of who they are. As I see it, real discipline can inform us in a few important life sustaining ways through this crisis.

First of all, discipline asks us to understand the “long game.” Facing real and sustained change requires letting go of a strict timeline. It is impossible for us to know when we will emerge from the current crisis. Unlike a marathon that ends in 26.2 miles we don’t know what the final mile marker will be. So like a marathon runner, we have to train ourselves as if we could keep on running well past the finish line. Like a parent welcoming a child, this is only the beginning.

Next, discipline invites us to accept small goals and successes. No doctoral thesis was ever written in one long writing fit. It is crafted and cobbled together in small careful pieces...certainly with a larger goal in mind, but each page, each paragraph is a small success that is worth recognizing as movement toward the larger goal.

Then, discipline encourages us to learn permanent life lessons. Athletes may stop competing but they never stop being athletes. Someone who trains for the games permanently alters their body and their mind for their athletic endeavor. Although the day to day high level skill may fade, the underlying drive and endurance never leaves them. They will always be a world class athlete. They are forever changed...and so are we.

Lastly, discipline demands that we have patience. If you don’t have patience as an athlete, you *will* over train your body possibly doing permanent damage (physical and or mental) to the instrument you have so carefully worked to create. It is not just patience to wait for something to happen, but patience to know that change is happening. Patience to recognize that any time you lose ground in your progress, you gain an opportunity to grow and reinforce even better habits and skills as you work

back to where you were. Patience accepts success and defeat, winning and loss.

More and more faith leaders, political leaders and commentators are speaking of our current situation as a marathon so I know I'm not alone in this framework. But I want to be sure that you don't regard this marathon as a chore or a burden or a struggle. I want to encourage you all to find excitement in what it means to be asked by your world, asked by our brief time on this planet together, asked by our fellow beings, human and otherwise to accept this challenge. To recognize every day as another opportunity, another piece of our collective training toward a glorious finish line we have yet to even understand. In this moment, our preparation and our competition are one. We are learning how to be who we need to be to get to where we need to go. It is uncomfortable, sometimes it is defeating and debilitating. And like any intense training, it comes with loss...sometimes devastating loss.

This is why we must at all costs carve for ourselves the space and creativity to understand our lives in completely new and thrilling and even contradictory ways. Life that is at once gentle and tough; surgically precise and deep; massive and quiet. We are learning to accept the real time contradiction of living in a finite world. And so because we don't know when this journey will end or how, let's play the long game, accepting the small precious goals along the way, training and transforming ourselves to be our best selves and being patient with ourselves and others as we meet the inevitable failures and triumphs that come with this gift of life.

Ours is the opportunity of a generation. We are faced with catastrophic tragedy that demands that the actions of those who survive will honor the lives of those lost. This means that we are in a race that we can win simply by staying in it. Staying in it requires that we embrace the fact that we have the discipline, we have the tools, we have the technology to be completely transformed for the common good. We must accept that in so many ways, after so much loss and with so much growth we can never go back to before. There can be glory for us all in that transformation.

Pace yourself. Stay in it. Be kind, be gentle, be strong, be resilient. Let's win this race.

May it be so.

Chalice Lighting:

Saint Francis and the Sow (excerpt) by Galway Kinnell

The bud
stands for all things,
even for those things that don't flower,
for everything flowers, from within, of self-blessing;
though sometimes it is necessary
to reteach a thing its loveliness,

Sending:

"Back to Before" (excerpt) by Lynn Ahrens from the musical *Ragtime*

There are people out there
Unafraid of revealing
That they might have a feeling,
Or they might have been wrong.
There are people out there
Unafraid to feel sorrow,
Unafraid of tomorrow,
Unafraid to be weak,
Unafraid to be strong...