

How Shall We Live Now?

Rev. Ken Read-Brown
First Parish in Hingham (Old Ship Church)
Unitarian Universalist
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Story for All Ages

I didn't watch much of the Summer Olympics, actually not much more than a few televised highlights. But after the Olympics I learned about a particular moment in the semifinals of the men's 800-meter race. Perhaps you've heard of this too.

Here's what happened:

One of the favorites in the event, American Isaiah Jewett, got his legs accidentally tangled up with the legs of Nijel Amos of Botswana as they were rounding the final turn, both doing well and each striving mightily to place well enough to make it to the finals and maybe win a gold medal.

But they both went down. The other runners leapt over them or ran around them. The race was over for Jewett and Amos.

Then Jewett looked over at Amos, and here's what he said went through his mind: "I could feel myself start to get down, but for some reason I looked over at the other competitor and saw the defeat on his face, and the hero I wanted to be came out. So I said, 'Let's get up and finish this race.'"

Jewett extended his hand. Amos took his hand. They got up and jogged side by side to the finish.

Here's what else Jewett said afterwards: "When I saw him and the way he looked so down, it hurt me. I didn't want to hurt, and I didn't want him to hurt. I wanted to do something that was good, something that was right. If you're giving everything that you have, you don't have anything to regret. Yes, it might turn out differently than expected, but that's life. At the end of the day, heroes fall down all the time, but legends always get up."

Sermon

My question for today is "How shall we live now?"

Twenty years ago on the first Sunday after 9/11 we asked similar questions, as it seemed that overnight the world had changed and that maybe nothing would ever be the same.

Which in fact was true. The world did change on that day.

Though one way or another the world is of course always changing, just sometimes more dramatically than at other times, to say the least. Even so, answers to the question "How shall we live?" remain remarkably consistent, don't they? So it seems to me.

In October of 2001 I preached a sermon based in part on a passage from the French writer Antoine de St. Exupery, in which he wrote that we are to pass along our "heritage of mind and heart, laughter and tears, musings and deeds," knowing that "Love, like a carefully loaded ship, crosses the gulf between the generations."

If anything, isn't it more important than ever to pass along our heritage of values and of love, in these days of so many shared challenges, from the climate crisis to COVID to the polarization and hate that too often pass for our national and global dialogue.

I don't know about you, but I haven't been taking a lot of joy from the daily news these days. Indeed in darker moments, I wonder if the human race is faltering and maybe about to fall altogether over our own legs or each other's legs as we round what might be the final turn of our story.

Then I take heart – and a measure of joy – from a story such as the one I shared today of the American runner reaching out his hand to the African runner, both of whom had fallen and lost any chance of placing in that race, the 800-meter semifinals in this year's summer Olympics.

That simple and profound gesture lifted my heart.

And reminded me that this is who we are as human beings. Yes, we are capable of hate and of terrible violence. But we are also capable of good, and we do much good.

In that same sermon not long after 9/11 I quoted the ancient Chinese philosopher Mencius, who affirmed that “The tendency of human nature to do good is like that of water to flow downward.”

Do we believe this?

Seems to me we must. And there is abundant evidence. After all, we see this truth manifest every time disaster strikes. We surely saw it after 9/11 in so many ways. We've been seeing it after the devastation of Hurricane Ida – there was the fellow who ferried dozens of people to safety with his little boat in southern Louisiana; then there were the hotel workers out west whose jobs paused in the midst of wildfires and who began delivering food to the firefighters instead; and how about people across the country, red states and blue states, left and right, willing to take in Afghan refugees.

And we see small but importance gestures of helping and healing in “ordinary” times, every day.

I know, I know. For every example of goodness and love you can counter with quite the contrary. But, as I also said those twenty years ago, when John Adams wrote to his young son, John Quincy Adams that “to be good, and to do good, is all we have to do,” he was not proposing an impossible task. Rather he was reminding his son of what it is in our nature to be and to do.

Joe and Jill Biden called young Isaiah Jewett a hero for offering that hand up to his competitor. But Jewett didn't think of himself as a hero. Seems he felt he was just doing what is in his and our nature to do.

And which we are collectively more likely to do, and the next generation is more likely to do, the more often we pass along our heritage, to children, to one another, of mind and heart in the spirit of St. Exupery – teaching not just with words but mostly with our lives and deeds. Of course.

As you know, we are in the midst of the Jewish High Holy Days, the Days of Awe between Rosh Hashanah (the New Year) and Yom Kippur (the Day of Atonement). During this time Jews are meant to reflect on how they have lived in the year just past and to reflect on how they will strive to live in the year to come. It is a worthy enterprise, needless to say. The same question: “How shall we live now?” – asked every year.

Well, we could do no better – whether Jewish, Christian, Muslim, Buddhist, humanist – than to ask this question of ourselves each day – not as a weight to carry around, not as a “should” to burden us. For it’s actually a sort of joyful question, perhaps opening our hearts and minds and lives to opportunities and ways of living we hadn’t considered. J.R.R. Tolkien put it simply when he wrote in *The Fellowship of the Ring* that “all we have to decide is what to do with the time that is given us.”

Look, giving up on the human race is not a happy, and certainly not a useful, option. After all, as you’ve heard me say from time to time, do we really know enough to be *that* pessimistic? We surely do know enough to be worried – very worried. That’s okay. It’s normal. It’s human.

You know, when I worry about one of our children or one of our grandchildren, it is because I love them!

In the same way, our worry about the human race, about threatened species – from monarch butterflies to right whales, about the health of the planet... that worry also comes from a place of love, doesn’t it.

Now... as you might have guessed I was going to say eventually this morning or next week or the week after... - this is where a church such as ours comes in. Here: an incubator for our values. Here: where we tend to one another, grow our love, reach out together to heal and help in the wider world. Here: where we re-center ourselves each week for our week to come. Here: where we become more resilient, more able to live through personal slings and arrows of fortune, more able to face our shared challenges, because we have each other for support and inspiration – and love.

Pretty darn good.

And as poet Denise Levertov wrote in her poem “Beginners”:

...we have only begun
to love the earth.
We have only begun
to imagine the fullness of life.
How could we tire of hope?
—so much is in bud...
—we have only begun
to imagine justice and mercy,
only begun to envision
how it might be
to live as siblings with beast and flower,
not as oppressors.
Surely our river
cannot already be hastening
into the sea of nonbeing?

We have only begun to know
the power that is in us if we would join
our solitudes in the communion of struggle.
So much is unfolding that must
complete its gesture,
so much is in bud.

So... we begin another “church year” – as we’ve been doing since 1635 and since 1681 in this very Meeting House! That should tell us something about resilience and survival. Still here after all these years, centuries; still here in our nation with its many contradictions of high ideals woven together with terrible violence and injustice; still here in this world of unutterable beauty and love woven into the same fabric of the ugliness of hatred and war; yet still here in this unfolding mystery we call cosmos.

Yes, we begin again... with kindness and love.
For this I am grateful. For this, may we all be grateful.
As we begin again.

So may it long be.