

Be Good Descendants

June 30, 2024

With the Lens of Time...

With the Paris Olympics coming up in a few weeks, my niece and I have been sharing videos of some of our favorite Olympic moments. From the Hamill Camel to the Miracle on Ice to Mary Lou Retton's floor and bars routines to every dive Greg Louganis took, there are innumerable iconic moments in the Olympics that have captured our imaginations.

One of the videos I sent to my niece was of Kerri Strug's one leg vault. I sent it with a note, "You gotta see this." I sent it without reviewing the video, just remembering the wonder it evoked in me at the time. Then I played it for myself.

Do you remember the competition I'm talking about? It was the 1996 Olympics in Atlanta. The U.S., under the iron fisted coaching of Bella Karolyi, had a solid chance at the gymnastics overall gold, a solid chance to beat the Russians, but the U.S.'s lead was shrinking. Kerri made her run toward the vault, made her planned 1-1/2 twist, and then landed wrong and fell, having torn two ligaments.

After I sent the video to my niece, I watched it. This time, I wasn't as inspired. In fact, as I watched, I felt myself getting a little sick. Not the "this is so exciting" kind of sick, but rather the "this is not right" kind of sick. Whereas when I watched with rapt attention in 1996, I saw a fierce competitor and athlete; when I watched in 2024 I saw the pleading, terrified eyes of an 18 year old girl as her coach shouted at her over and over and over again, "You can do it!" What I saw when I watched in 2024 was a coach who was more interested in Olympic gold than in the athlete's health.

The lens I didn't have in 1996 was of the systematic emotional and physical abuse that was part of USA Gymnastics in that era, the authoritarian culture Karolyi created. According to Karolyi's own recounting, Strug told him that she couldn't feel her leg, and his response was "We got to go one more time. Shake it out." Strug did vault again, did stick her landing, and the injury ended her career.

As it turns out, the U.S.A. didn't need her vault. They would have won the gold anyway. And Kerri Strug was pushed, literally, to the breaking point and then put out to pasture. The coaches, and even serial sexual abuser Larry Nassar, continued their long careers, while the athletes were treated as a disposable resource.

I share this long introduction this week as we celebrate Pride, not because any of the players in the story are gay, but because it is a powerful example of how our societal narratives can change. Whereas in 1996, "power through it" and "beat the Russians at all cost" was the dominant narrative, today we recognize Karolyi's coaching for what it was: abusive.

What is valorous?

Allow me to change topics slightly. This spring, I was invited by the Carter Center to participate in a training focused on disrupting political violence in the 2024 election in Wisconsin. The prospect is chilling. Our trainer has done this work all over the world, in Kenya and Bosnia and

more. As we talked about what breeds political climates such as the one we're in right now as well as how to diffuse such climates, one of the things she talked about was changing the notion of what is valorous. There was lots of discussion about hands-on, nitty-gritty violence prevention, but the niche for communities of faith is around changing the notion of what is valorous, re-shaping what we as a society consider honorable.

In Tuzla, a city in Bosnia, they worked to forge a local civic pride that transcended the divisions of Bosnian / Serb / Croat. In Rwanda, community leaders worked to reinforce the nonviolent norms and moral expectations of the Quran and spread the message, "there's no Hutu, there are no Tutsi, we are human beings." Violence is prevented, society advances, when we re-shape the narrative of what is valorous, what is virtuous, what is good and right and holy and just.

Kwame Anthony Appiah writes The Ethicist column for the New York Times. He wrote a book in 2010 called "The Honor Code." In it, he studies how social transformation happens. How did dueling stop being the way aristocratic British resolved disputes? How did footbinding come to an end in China? He concludes that social transformation happens when our narrative of what is honorable changes.

That's why I chose our Gospel lesson for today. It's a tight, condensed story, placed in the Gospel to show us that Jesus' notions of what is right changed when his eyes were opened, and therefore our notions of what is good and right and holy and just ought to be able to change as we become more enlightened as well.

We start out with Jesus encountering a Canaanite woman seeking healing for her daughter. His first response was to ignore her. Then, when the disciples complain that she's still annoying them, Jesus cites the exclusivism of his time, saying, "I was sent only to the lost sheep of Israel." When the woman is persistent, still begging for help, Jesus' response is outright racist, calling the woman and her daughter dogs. The woman is brilliant in her response. Instead of trying to nullify Jesus' notion that his ministry is exclusively meant to benefit his own people, instead of getting angry or defensive when he belittles and demeans her and her daughter, she asserts that even with all that he has said, she and her daughter are still deserving. She doesn't fight Jesus, she broadens his worldview, and in doing so, she gains healing not only for her daughter, but for all of those who Jesus realizes he was inappropriately excluding.

Conclusion

This notion that a foreign woman changes Jesus' mind and expands his understanding of his ministry ought to be instructive to us as we celebrate Pride, as we advocate for justice for the LGBTQIA2S+ community and beyond, as we seek to dismantle racism, as we celebrate freedom this week and seek liberty and justice for all. So much of what is masquerading as religious justification for homophobic and misogynistic and racist policies is rooted in an attempt to hold on to what is (and sometimes a revisionist notion of what was) at all costs. What practitioners of this way of being don't understand is that to be alive, by its very definition, means that change is inevitable, and the moral imperative is to improve conditions for future generations, not stagnate or roll them back.

Adam Grant, a professor of psychology at the Wharton School at the University of Pennsylvania, puts it this way:

“It’s more important to be good ancestors than dutiful descendants. Too many people spend their lives being custodians of the past instead of stewards of the future. We worry about making our parents proud when we should be focused on making our children proud. The responsibility of each generation is not to please our predecessors—it’s to improve conditions for our successors.”

I would add that our Gospel today reminds us that the Christian notion of who “our” successors are ought to be as expansive as possible.

Friends, as we close out Pride Month 2024, there’s a lot to celebrate. If we look back 25 years ago to where society was in 1999 when this church became Open and Affirming, if we look back 55 years ago to where society was when the Stonewall riots ushered in a new chapter of activism in the LGBTQIA2S+ community, we’ve come a long way. And, anti-trans legislation and the dismantling of DEI is not accidental.

Our task as followers of Jesus is to constantly and consistently by expanding the notion of who is included in God’s loving embrace. It is to be changing the notion of what has valor. In 1996, the world looked on and cheered as Bella Karolyi sacrificed Kerri Strug on the altar of Olympic gold. Some will argue that Strug was a fierce competitor and would have wanted to make her second vault anyway. But I think we’re in a better place as a society when we expect coaches to have the physical and mental wellbeing of their athletes at heart even as they seek glory. Our notion of what is valorous has changed.

My prayer is that we can achieve this change in so many other arenas:

- in our inclusion of the gender expansive community.
- in the experience the justice system for members of the BIPOC community.
- in our notion of arming ourselves to the teeth as security.

People, indeed societies, change. Our challenge is to be on the side of ever-expanding Grace. May it be so. Alleluia, and Amen.

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