

**New St. James Presbyterian Church, London, Ontario**  
**Sunday, August 14, 2016**  
**Rev. Andrew Reid**  
**Hebrews 11:29-12:2**  
**Running with ...**

Between last Sunday and today, I wonder just how many sermons will have been preached around the Olympic Games. Some, I am sure, will have said positive things; others will have said negative things. For there are a lot of things to be said on both sides.

On the positive side: The Olympics are all about pride in one's country, and nationalism. On the negative side: they bring out some of the worst kind of xenophobia you will find anywhere.

On the positive side: for the first time ever, there is an Olympic team made up entirely of people who are refugees, who no longer have a country to call their own and represent. On the negative side: there have been reports of as many as 77,000 Brazilians being displaced within their own country to accommodate the Games.

On the positive side: the level of personal focus, and discipline, and training, and preparation that athletes must achieve to get to the Olympics. On the negative side: the controversy over the number of athletes known to have used performance enhancing drugs to get to the Olympics.

On the positive side: the athletes' pride in their personal achievements. On the negative side: The Chicago Tribune feeling it necessary to introduce an athlete who won her second bronze medal while competing at her third Olympic Games, as the wife of a Chicago Bears football player.

On the positive side: the collaboration and cooperation and teamwork of athletes in their different fields, all working together for a shared goal. On the negative side: one commentator suggesting that the person really responsible for a gold medal-winning, world record-setting swim was not the swimmer but her husband.

But let's end this with positives: On the positive side: the selfie – yes, that's right, this is me saying something positive about a selfie – the selfie that two young smiling gymnasts took together: one represents North Korea, the other South Korea. And the best of all on the positive side: the woman who competed in fencing wearing a hijab: a Muslim woman representing the United States. Take that, Donald Trump.

I'm not sure whether to be surprised that today's Revised Common Lectionary readings include the passage from Hebrews that we just read. Reading the bit about "running with perseverance the race that is set before us" today of all days seems just too much of a coincidence. But there again, those of us who trust in the leading of God's Holy Spirit don't believe in coincidence, do we?

Starting back in Hebrews 10:19, the writer of the letter to the Hebrews has been writing about perseverance. He starts out encouraging his readers to enter the sanctuary by the blood of Jesus, with a true heart, in full assurance of faith, with hearts sprinkled clean from an evil conscience and bodies washed with pure water, holding fast to the confession of their hope without wavering. And he urges them to consider how to provoke one another to love and good deeds, not neglecting to meet together, as is the habit of some, but encouraging one another Hebrews 10:19-25.

He opens chapter 11 with a statement about the meaning of faith: it is the assurance of things hoped for, the conviction of things not seen, according to Hebrews 11:1. And he goes on in chapter 11 to recite a litany of examples of people of faith from the history of the people of Israel. He mentions by name Abel, Enoch, Noah, Abraham, Moses, Rahab, Gideon, Barak, Samson, Jephthah, David, and Samuel. And he talks about prophets and others whom he doesn't name but who endured that grisly list of torture, persecution and abuse.

They form so great a cloud of witnesses who surround the people reading the letter, and by extension, us. Inspired and motivated by their example, we are urged to lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and to run with perseverance the race that is set before us ... Hebrews 12:1.

But it is not only the example of the great cloud of witnesses that motivates us. We are also urged to look to Jesus the pioneer and perfecter, the author and finisher, as the King James Version puts it, of our faith. We are reminded that for the sake of the joy that was set before him (he) endured the cross, disregarding its shame. And we are told that because he did so, he has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God Hebrews 12:2. The people who remained faithful through so much in the past were commended for their faith. But in Jesus Christ, God has provided something better for the faithful followers of Jesus Christ who first read this letter, and for us who are his faithful followers today, as we run with perseverance the race that is set before us.

The writer to the Hebrews connects the faithful running of the race that is before us with looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith. I would like to take that idea and turn it around a bit. I'd like you to think about what the faithful running of the race that is before us means in the context, not simply of looking to Jesus, but of being surrounded by the great cloud of witnesses.

Who can forget the shooting of Corporal Nathan Cirillo at the National War memorial in Ottawa in 2014. I remember being deeply moved – I still am whenever I think of it – by an editorial cartoon that appeared in the Halifax Chronicle Herald a couple of days later. It showed the figures on the National War memorial, the statues of Canadian soldiers, reaching down, one of them kneeling down, to tend the body of Corporal Cirillo. That's a powerful image of comradeship within the military, and of compassion, and of caring. But it is also a powerful image of what being surrounded by a great crowd of witnesses means.

When hard times hit us, as individuals of faith and as a community of faith, we so often feel that we stand alone. That what is happening to us is happening to no-one else. That no-one else understands, or can ever understand. That no-one cares, and that we must go through it alone.

Yes, of course what happens to us happens to us. Yes, of course no-one fully understands who has not been through what we are going through. But that does not mean that we are alone. As people of faith and followers of Jesus Christ, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith stands with us. The God and Father of our Lord Jesus supports us and strengthens us.

And we are surrounded by a great cloud of witnesses. Not simply the people from the past that the writer to the Hebrews names. We stand in the midst of the people who surround us here and now, right here, right now. We are loved by them, supported by them, encouraged by them, strengthened by them, cared for by them. All we need to do is open ourselves up and allow ourselves to be loved and supported and encouraged and strengthened and cared for. That's what it means to run the race that is set before us together.