

Mutual Joy

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Trinity Church in the City of Boston
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One of the best things about life in New England is summer. We wait all year in freezing cold, in the short winter days for these few treasured weeks of bliss. Now mind you they are fickle these summer days. Bliss is not guaranteed. Sometimes we get days of rain, sometimes sweltering humidity. Sometimes it is cooler than we would like. They are not perfect, these summer days, but we love them anyway and for one reason, I think; because we know they will not last.

There are other things about summer that are lovely too in addition to the weather. Summer is the time for vacations, long weekends and longer days, baseball and fresh fruit and corn on the cob, trips to see friends and time to read novels for the sheer pleasure of it.

One of the greatest shifts that happen for me each year during this season is my own awareness of time. I know it is not true but it suddenly feels like there is more of it and I find myself wanting to be more generous with it. There is less of a feeling of panic when I look at my watch. Instead, time seems to go more slowly. There is, it seems, more time to share a meal with a friend, to linger over a good conversation, to make last minute plans to do something with people who may actually be available, to spend more time in the garden or on a walk or just taking in the world that sometimes passes us by the rest of the year. In other words, the clocks and calendars and schedules that drive so much of our lives feel just a little less important right now. And that is a good thing.

At Trinity Church we shift into summer mode too. We adjust our worship schedule, the clergy who are not on vacation preach shorter sermons, we happily welcome more visitors and tourists to our Sunday worship, our weekly round of staff meetings end, our vestry takes a break from their monthly meeting schedule, and our staff gets much deserved and needed time off. In fact last week our parish office seemed so abandoned that I could swear I saw tumbleweeds blow by! But that is good for us too. Good to be reminded that our worth as people is not tied to how busy we are, or how many meetings we attend, or how much we produce. Our worth as people, created by God, is simply by virtue of our existence. And maybe summer is a concrete reminder of that very fundamental, very hard to believe fact. There were many conversations last week in the office (among the few if us there) wondering what it might look like if we could keep this sense of calm, of quiet, of peace all year long. Like the love we feel and Christmas and the hope we feel at the start of a new year, summer is perhaps so attractive because it is so fleeting. We just start to appreciate it and it is over. Or maybe we do appreciate it because we know it will be over. Like so many things the fleeting, temporal nature of summer is quite simply a gift. Like new love, or a fine wine, or a magnificent sunset we can appreciate the gift the moment but we cannot cling to it, change it or control it no matter how hard we try.

So what does summer have to each of us about the life of faith? A lot, I think. Being a Christian is not meant to be a hard task – though some would want us to think so. Being a Christian is not primarily about rules, or doctrines or institutional structures – though some would want us to think that too. Our faith is important, but we cannot mistake importance for seriousness or difficulty. And though difficulty will come to each of us if it has not already, I wonder what it might look like if we lived our lives with a summer-like faith. A faith that had ample room, ample time for the relationships that matter most. Being a Christian is about relationships – ours to God, God's to us, through God's son Jesus Christ and in the power of the Spirit. And as if that were not enough, it is about our relationships with each other under the same umbrella of faith. We foster those relationships when we are at our most summer-like. When we take time, ample time, for prayer. When we are present, really present to what is happening in and through us in worship, when we are able, even for the most fleeting moment, to put our own need aside, and to care for another who is struggling or scared, grieving or sick. The life of faith invites us to be summer-like all year long, even when it is 6 degrees below zero and there is 3 feet of snow on the ground.

Being a Christian is about relationships – ours to God, God's to us, through God's son Jesus Christ and in the power of the Spirit. And as if that were not enough, it is about our relationships with each other under the same umbrella of faith. All relationships take work, and sometimes they are hard work, but it seems to me that we could do well to take a line from marriage service in the Book of Common Prayer Book and say that all our relationships should be about mutual joy. At the Exhortation, the opening piece that reminds us what we are gathered to do and why it matters, are these words, "The union of husband and wife in heart, body and mind is intended by God for their mutual joy." Marriage and our relationship to God are intended for joy. But let's extricate these words and say that they might apply to all relationships - whether between parents and children or siblings, or friends, or spouses. Mutual joy. Our faith life, even in moments of crisis or despair, is meant to be one of joy.

Today's gospel from Mark does not seem like a summer text and there is very little mutual joy. In a way it serves as a harsh reminder of all the senseless suffering we heard about in the news this week. Whether it was the violence in the Middle East or the collapse of the Big Dig and the crushing death of a local woman or something more personal, we did not need to look very far to see suffering around us. Joy can seem fleeting and far off anytime of the year and this week is no exception. The world around us suffers and our scripture text reinforces that theme. It is a cruel story, full of violence and manipulation and frankly not one I would ever have chosen for summer, or any other time of the year for that matter. This story about the beheading of John the Baptist and all the drama that led up to it is not one I particularly want to hear on a hot summer day. But it is what we get. And what a cast of characters there are. There are two men – John the Baptist and Herod Antipas. There are two women Herodias and her daughter not named in this text but believed to be Salome from other ancient sources. The wife, Herodias, is the mastermind behind this plot. She is angry that John the Baptist has spoken harshly about her marriage to her brother-in-law and she uses this occasion to get the revenge she wants

by steering her daughter, the dancing Salome's request. Told she could have anything she wanted, even half of his kingdom, Salome opts to fulfill her mother's request and asks for the head of John the Baptist. This whole story is a talk show or a self-help book in the making along the lines of "How to Say No to your Children" or "The Pitfalls and Practices of Step-parenting." There are no healthy relationships modeled here for us save one – the quiet, unsaid but assumed relationship of John the Baptist to God, from which all the rest of his life flowed.

Jesus is not mentioned at all in this text. Jesus is not the subject, nor is he the main speaker as he is in the rest of Mark. It is, instead, a foreshadowing of the death of Jesus himself. It is violent, and unjust. It is at the hands of the authorities who are manipulated by those around them and it far from being a summer-like Gospel. This story splits in the middle the story we heard last week about the sending out of the Twelve and their return. And Mark, the shortest of the synoptic gospels, dedicates more space to this story than either Matthew or Luke. In other words, this text for all its' peculiarities, is important. Mark wants his readers to know that the life of faith, even a joy-filled life of faith, will meet with challenges and obstacles, and even death. There it is. Nothing more, nothing less.

Being a Christian is about relationships – ours to God, God's to us, through God's son Jesus Christ and in the power of the Spirit. And as if that were not enough, it is about our relationships with each other under the same umbrella of faith. We foster those relationships when we are at our most summer-like, when we are able to see them all around us, when we give thanks for them and finally when we know the joy of the life of faith.

The life of faith is intended by God for our mutual joy and for the comfort we are given and we give in prosperity and adversity. May it be so for us this day and always.
Amen.