

Proper 24

I'd like to diverge from the readings this morning and talk about faith and joy. I've decided I don't preach much about the joy that comes out of our faith. And as a result, we as a congregation don't reflect the joy that can come out of our faith – a joy that makes us happy to be Christians and – even more – a joy that pushes us to actually want to share what we have as Christians.

We love the joy that comes from working with community organizations – with the museums, with the opera theatre, with the garden club, with sports teams and practicing together as we get ready to play, with alumni associations, with the weekly bridge club, with the paddling team, and with all sorts of other activities. We love doing those things, they make us happy, and they play an important part in our emotional and physical health. And we make time for them.

I wonder if it's possible to be involved in activities in a faith community that will bring us not only emotional and physical health – but activities that will also bring us spiritual health. Maybe activities that bring us emotional and physical and spiritual joy. Do you think that's possible?

I listened to a speaker on Friday who used the descriptor, "serial solemnity." I think that a good diagnosis for us. We suffer from serial solemnity. We need to have more fun. I've decided that part of this has to do with the serious of scripture. We don't get a lot of stories about the prophets having barbecues and inviting the neighbors over for a swim party. The only real swim party in the Old Testament was the Great Flood. Unless, that is, we count Jonah's dive into the sea when he was swallowed up by the big fish.

And there aren't many stories about fun in the New Testament. Of the 21 parables that Jesus told, I can't think of one that was funny. Like this morning's parable about the Pharisee and the poor man, we struggle with who we are – if we're like the Pharisee, we are self-righteous and condemn ourselves as Jesus condemned the Pharisee; if we're like the poor man, we would be humble. But we considered ourselves humble, then we really wouldn't be humble, would we? Can we think of any stories that are descriptive of the good times Jesus and his band of followers had?

So we suffer from serial solemnity.

Is that really necessary all the time? Or even most of the time?

I think about our day school and the joy that comes from chapel. I mentioned this last week. We all pray and sing and hear stories. And everyone there – students and adults – everyone there has a good time. We end on a high note. There's lots of smiling and movement, there's a time for quiet and concentration, and there's great interest in the stories. And they're excited when they're dismissed to go into their days.

This is not just the kids – it's everyone. Even me. I feel good spending those 15 minutes three times a week and I even tell you about it and encourage you to join us because I want to share with you the good time we have worshipping God. We even have fun! And we are solemn during our prayers – but we don't suffer from serial solemnity!

Moving into a place of joy in our worship begins with community. That means coming together as one body. So we're sitting a little closer together this morning. Sometimes not in "our" pew. Sometimes closer to others than we might normally be comfortable. Sometimes with others we might not even know. We are becoming one body. Belonging – coming together – is crucial to the development of any community. We'll probably even exchange the peace with different people!

And as we come together, we can hear each other as we worship together. Let me suggest one way we will hear one another every Sunday morning: when it's the congregations turn to respond with Amen. With So Be It. With Yes. And do you know when the biggest time for that opportunity to respond together is? It's the Great Amen. Did you know we have a Great Amen? It's at the end of the Eucharistic prayer and before the Lord's Prayer, on page 336 in your prayer books. See those four capital letters that spell AMEN? We say that more strongly than we say any other Amen. We say them all of the Amens, of course. And don't be afraid ... if we all do it together, no one will stand out.

And then we say strongly the Great Amen. But please start saying Amen during the service. Say it clearly and maybe we can even say it like we mean it. If we say it enough, we might even start to really mean it! And in the Episcopal tradition, it's Ah-men, not A – men. That makes a really big difference – especially to God.

Maybe along with our Gospel story every week, we can remember some stories in this community that have lessons and laughter and can inform us as we go into to the world, rejoicing in the power of the spirit. I mean, Really. Think for a minute of something that has happened in this community – maybe during worship – maybe at an event – maybe during the day when you visited here. A story at least some of us might relate to. Like the stories in the Bible that some of us relate to. What can we learn? Will the humor in a story bring us also a lesson in life?

Stretching ourselves just a little bit. This kind of thing – like sitting closer together will take us a bit out of our comfort zone. It doesn't hurt –I don't think it does, does it? At least you're not touching one another. But I suspect there's a little more feeling of being part of one body. And listening to stories that make us smile or even laugh are not regular experiences for us in church. But they could be – even as we continue to pray and spend time with God. After all, Jesus was constantly in community during his life and ministry – even with those who didn't like him and perhaps even vice versa. He was, for the most part civil and even loving with everyone, unless someone really made him angry. Oh right. Jesus got angry, too. He actually emoted! I suspect he laughed a lot – we just don't hear those stories because we're supposed to be serious when we do church or pray or talk about our faith. But come to the discussion between services and you will experience seriousness, laughter, and even joy!

Maybe in this service we'll take the chance and sing a hymn every once in a while. Or we'll have background music that is a bit more uplifting the sacred religious music or monks chanting. Nothing too active or happy clappy, but perhaps something that might take us into a different spiritual place. You all know the old saying: "Singing is praying to God twice."

What would cause us to experience joy in a worship service? Or what would cause us to experience joy before and after a service? Or what would cause us to want to be together here in community during the week because we knew there was going to be joy and an uplifting time? Any ideas? Think about it.

We do not need to be victims of serial solemnity. We do not need to restrict ourselves to little boxes when we come to worship God together – as one body. We can go to some new places as we move forward on our journeys as Christians. We are all on that journey and can walk with one another even though we're in different places. But wherever we are now is not where God is calling us to be. Remember that. Wherever we are now is not where God is calling us to be. Together, though, we can help one another move into the next week, the next month, the next year. Together we can experience the joy that happens in this place three mornings a week. If those kids and adults can find joy in their time of worship together, surely we adults can find joy in our time together in this community.