

“Holy Fun”

Reading and sermon preached by Reverend Carolyn Patierno

June 1, 2014

Granted, this little tidbit may seem an odd way to kick-off a sermon on fun but I can't help myself.

This phrase, one we sometimes use to describe having worked very hard was first attested in 1532, by John Frith who – I came to find out was a Protestant priest and martyr. He died at the stake because he didn't believe in purgatory or transubstantiation and he wasn't quiet about his dissent. I'd say he was one of us and so in that case, let's say that it was a radical religionist who first and now famously, said:

"This Text holdeth their noses so hard to the grindstone, that it clean disfigureth their faces."

And so the sermon now officially begins:

It was that I had held my nose so hard to the grindstone that it felt as though my face had been disfigureth-ed.

I was in need of some fun. So I went to Facebook for a quick break and saw that my friend Tom Schade – who makes me laugh so hard that my stomach will ache– had a new post in his wonderful blog, “The Lively Tradition.” He named the post: “Over the Edge: the pre-GA silly season”. In it he describes the UUA's Stewardship and Development Department's plan to have some of our leaders rappel down the side of a very tall building to make a point about “the power of giving and creativity to transform our faith.”

Believe it or not, there are some UUs who aren't so happy about this idea and believe it or not, they are saying so. In the midst of all the saying so, Tom suggests that General Assembly serves as a screen upon which we project all of our anxieties about our movement. To add to the cauldron already bubbling with anxiety, he says that in the lead up to GA “we notice the thing the ‘UUA’ is doing at GA, instead of *what they should be doing*.” So, that pre-GA anxiety goes something like this: “This year it looks like the ‘UUA’ is jumping off of buildings, instead of solving the financial crisis of the local church, fighting the fossil fuel industry, or washing the feet of the lepers. No, they are jumping off buildings!”

I bet you can well imagine the things that good UUs were saying about this cockamamie rappelling idea. Oh how we like to go on ... and on ... and on.

Tom went on and said some other equally smart and funny things but mostly, I was just so glad that he made the case that we too often hold on so tightly. In response I said a hearty “Amen” ... and this:

And may I just add: can we just have some holy fun? Loosen up in the face of whatever it may be that makes us cringe and try to embrace the spirit of it all? GA is going to be wonderful and silly and moving and inspiring and ridiculous and sublime. GA as life. Hooray!

It's going to be ... yes, you heard it here first ... it's going to be fun!!!! Not just fun, *Holy fun*: pure, unadulterated *fun*. Because when we're having fun, our hearts are lighter. The fog that frequently rolls in around our minds, lifts and fun, as it turns out, is the foghorn. We see more clearly when we are having fun in the task. Because really, why would we do nearly anything if it wasn't fun? Why wouldn't we try to infuse some fun into even the most difficult circumstance? For example, as we get behind the wheel to begin the scary drive down to Yale's Smilow Cancer Center why wouldn't we exclaim, “Road trip!!!” with the absolute certainty that in the face of absolute uncertainty nothing makes us more courageous than a good laugh.

“Feel like dancing, hallelujah! Since I laid my burden down”

I actually think that the dancing comes first *and then* the laying down of burdens.

Every night I lay down my burden and I watch a little television. I know. I know. Some of you boast that you haven't owned a television since Ed Sullivan went off the air. Good for you. Me? I love television. And I really love the “Tonight Show with Jimmy Fallon.” I love Jimmy Fallon in part, truth be told, because he reminds me of my friend, Michael and I always miss Michael. But as much, and as my grandmother would say, “Jimmy Fallon is doll.” He's joyful. He's exuberant. He loves what he's doing. So it was a matter time (and I'm sorry it wasn't me) before some church lady – male, female or otherwise – put pen to paper and thought about what we might learn right here at All Souls from Jimmy Fallon.

Here's a bit of what one Episcopal priest had to say:

5 THINGS THE CHURCH CAN LEARN FROM JIMMY FALLON - (adapted) by David Henson

Lesson 1: Embrace the Joy and Enthusiasm in the moment. Sure, lots of churches claim to have joy and enthusiasm... Some actually do. But, let's be honest, churches still have a lot to learn when it comes to joy and enthusiasm. What Jimmy does best is exist in the

moment ... fully... His joy and enthusiasm for each moment or guest is ... a profound act of hospitality. ...

Sunday morning is the most important time and place for a congregation to express our collective joy. If the service lacks joy and enthusiasm, it lacks soul. And with a name like ours, we gotta have soul.

And we have to extend profound acts of hospitality. Profound. That means extending oneself in a way that may well go against the reserved Yankee culture in which we live, Friends. We know there's a warm heart that beats beneath the New Englander's reserved countenance. At All Souls we strive for heartbeats that are *heard and felt*.

We begin: You are *joyfully* called to worship.

We conclude: *Go with great joy* and return again in peace.

See what we're doing there?

And still, in surprising ways, church folks can and do forget.

Here's a story: back in the fall I attended a friend's installation. It was quite an affair. The church was packed. All the congregation showed up as well as over 50 clergy. This congregation had been through some hard times and this ceremony would mark the beginning of a new chapter. It was a beautiful, golden autumn twilight illuminating the congregation's equally golden sense of hope. But as the service rolled out and on, something very odd happened. Each guest who had been invited to participate seemed to have boarded the same train: the express to Doomsday. Each of them spoke in earnest of our devastated world ... our hurting world ... our spinning out of control world.

All of which is true. But "C'mon!" I wanted to shout from the balcony. "Lighten up, Frances!" My esteemed colleagues forgot to wrap the message in the beautifully crafted parchment that is joy. And I have a feeling I know why: the inbox of oppression that is our email.

Here's a sample from my own inbox:

- This will change how you see immigration!
- A prison cell in 3rd grade?!
- Big food pushes weaker organic standards!

- 200,000 for gun sense!
- End mass incarceration now!
- Queer our taxes!

And finally, as if all of that wasn't enough to get me in a lather, the final stake in my heart:

- Butterflies are dying!

All of these are causes near and dear to my heart. All calling to me and to you - with the amplification of exclamation points!!!! And taken together - as people of faith with a commitment to justice do - it's easy to forget to live in the moment ... that joy must prevail.

But as one fierce advocate once said, "If I can't dance, I don't want to be part of your revolution."

So yes. The world is hurting and spinning out of control but if we don't have any fun, Friends, what are we fighting for?

Lesson 2: Embrace Divine Playfulness. ... As adults, we've lost the importance and the spirituality of play. It is a good reminder, and a reminder the church often forgets, that play is a profound form of prayer that brings people together.

I have a friend. She's can rightfully be called a "church lady". And she's an excellent one, believe me. But she *holdeth her nose so hard to the grindstone.* She has to be reminded to play. She has to be assured that no one will mind if she stops and rests and has some fun. Permission to play! Lift up your spirit and play! The youth group plays a game every time they gather. Bless their hearts. Do they think they're praying? Likely not. But I agree: play brings us together in profound ways.

On Sunday morning - and every day - we are playful. It's especially important though on Sunday morning. So we sing the "Eensy Weensy Spider" just and only because it's fun and like a prayer, it brings us together.

Lesson 3: Embrace that It's All Bigger than You. Jimmy Fallon made it clear in his first [show] that he wasn't in control of the "Tonight Show." Rather, he was its steward. "I just want to do the best I can to take care of the show for awhile," he said during his first monologue. Even though he's responsible for it for awhile, he knows the

institution is bigger than him and it will continue on after him.

All Souls is bigger than any one or 300 of us. That is, our mission is bigger than we are. This church has been a liberal religious beacon for over 100 years and with our stewardship, that light will continue on. You and I will pass but All Souls will continue on because of our wise and ebullient stewardship.

Lesson 4: *Embrace the Change.* But just because he respects the institution doesn't mean Jimmy will keep doing things the same way. In fact, it's his deep respect and love for the institution that is pushing him to change it... He embraces the cultural changes around him and adapts the institution to its environment. He brings the institution to a new generation with dynamism and with respect for it.

Oh, this is the tough one: "Embrace the change." Thankfully, what we don't hear a lot of around here is, "But we've always done it that way." Which isn't to say that change doesn't make us feel wobbly.

It does and that isn't easy. In order for us to keep addressing needs – in order to keep relevant! – we must continually adapt and yes, change. But if we infuse our approach to change with trust, open hearts and minds and I would add *good humor* at least when we're wobbly, we feel the steady hand of assurance at our backs.

"Don't be afraid of some change! Don't be afraid of some change!" Why not, according to the hymn? Because: "Today will be a joyful day!"

Lesson 5: Embrace Hope. There is virtually zero cynicism on the "Tonight Show ". Each show feels like an unrestrained celebration of life. There's a time for critique and speaking up, but that has to be balanced with the celebration of life. ...

Cynicism is the polar opposite of hope. Hope is what church is all about. We gather on Sunday morning for worship to nourish ourselves with hope. Hope helps us face our inboxes. Hope propels us up the spout again. Hope is born of joy and yes, fun.

I grew up with a mother who believed that every day presented a new opportunity to have some fun. Lucky for her, she found a partner, my father who believes the same. Thankfully, I brought some of that sunny disposition to a very dark time in my life and this country's history ... the late 80s and through the 90s when AIDS nearly destroyed communities that were considered expendable. It was brutal ... and we had so much fun. Fun in hospital rooms ... in the streets ... in the midst of the tedious work that was writing federal grant applications ... we had fun laughing in the face of despair and terror. There was cynicism and

anger and grief but the fun tempered it all. Made it all bearable.

Thank goodness. It wouldn't have turned the corner without the joy that carried us along.

Without joy to carry us along, we are lost, Friends.

Fun: right here where the entrance to the church is sometimes flanked by flamingos. Where the hallway is lined with surprising little figurines that wiggle. Where you are joyfully called to have some Holy Fun.

Welcome to All Souls.

Amen.

Sermon © Reverend Carolyn Patierno. All rights reserved. Reproduction by permission only.