



ST BART'S

A SERMON by:

The Rev. Matthew J. Moretz, Associate Rector

Uncomfortable Joy

Sermon preached at the nine o'clock service, December 16, 2012

The Third Sunday of Advent

Based on Philippians 4:4-7 and Luke 3:7-18

“Rejoice in the Lord, always. Again I will say Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.”

Really, Paul? “Always.”? This is a tall order. I’m having a tough time rejoicing, lately. Believe you me, I’m trying. But, I went to an event this weekend, carols were sung around a piano. But, I don’t know how to say it, the carols didn’t glimmer in the dark. They were dull, somehow, and felt a little false. And I went to an ordination of a friend, yesterday, in Rye. It was the celebration of a bright future for this young man with a full priestly career ahead of him, a celebration of the church, a celebration of the good news in the world through his work. But, still, it was a deflated celebration. Punctured by the violence in Newton, Connecticut, where so many died. Before the service, the bishop of Connecticut, who was ordaining my friend, led us in prayers for the dead, and the church tolled the bell one time for each of them. We stood in silence, sitting with the pain of it all, sharing in the mourning of the families. But we didn’t stop there. We summoned the energy to do the work of celebration for the rest of the service.

Robbie Parker, whose 6-year-old daughter, Emilie, was among the dead in Connecticut, he spoke to reporters of his daughter “bright, creative and very loving,” he shed tears for her, But, he did not stop there, he added, “as we move on from what happened here, what happened to so many people, let us not let it turn into something that defines us.” There is great wisdom in this bereaved parent. Wisdom that we would do well to pursue.

As hard as it is, as scouring as it is, maybe there is something to this. This “rejoicing always” that Paul talks about. But it must be a very different kind of joy than what we are used to. It is not the joy of this world, a pleasure that comes from the state of affairs in which we find ourselves. This is the joy that is being sold to us by the people who are making a big push to convince us that we can buy ourselves and our families into happiness. This is the joy that depends on pain and death being sidelined, sadness being shushed, manic activity blinding us from so many ever present blessing, and beckons us to yearn for a world of magic where not much goes wrong. That kind of joy is all so fleeting. And because of the way things are, any joy that depends on material abundance, the absence of violence and the absence of death would never last long. It is so brittle.

As Paul says, we are not rejoicing in the world, but we are rejoicing in the Lord. This is a very different kind of joy. This is an enigmatic kind of celebration. But this joy in the Lord and this celebration in the Lord is the very thing that we cultivate as Christians. It is so much more robust. We “celebrate” the Eucharist together every Sunday as a people. Not only upon happy occasions like baptisms and weddings, but during times of great sorrow: at deathbeds and at funerals and after all manner of catastrophes. In the short time that I have been with you here at St. Bart’s, this is the second time that I find myself celebrating the Eucharist quite soon after a mass shooting. We don’t stop celebrating when anguish comes. Even at the grave we make our song, Alleluia, Alleluia, Alleluia. It is in our worship and in our holy hope that we work to give our broken hearts a song to sing. And in a world like ours, a world with a steady procession of “not again’s, the songs of the broken hearted are the only ones that will last very long. These are the songs that begin as songs of mourning. But with every new verse of that song, some of the anguish for what was lost is transmuted into thanksgiving for what was given.

The central matter of the Eucharist, the brutal death of God's Son, presents the epitome of sorrow, and when we perform a Eucharist, taking the symbols of that broken body and spilled blood, and we hold it close, and take it inside us, one would think that it would only cultivate the spirit of depression and despair. But, I think many of you would agree with me, it is really, surprisingly, a font of hope and consolation. Why is the Eucharist not the ultimate killjoy? Because when we "celebrate" the Eucharist, we pursue a joy in the Lord that can withstand the pain and grief in this world, we reprogram sorrow from the inside out by sitting with it, and finding a joy in the Lord, who overcomes it somehow, despite the status quo. Now, in Christ, the status quo of violence and death is broken. God is present in the darkness. God claims the darkness by mourning with us, loving with us, and forgiving among us. God quietly triumphs over the darkness, while it is still dark. This is the joy in the Lord. This is the joy that we desire. This is the joy for which we yearn to cultivate in every season and in the face of every stage of life, like a precious flower.

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