

“Reflections on Revelry”

A Homily by the Rev. Dr. Stephanie May

First Parish in Wayland

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As you may have read, today’s homily is entitled “Reflections on Revelry.” My favorite definition of revelry comes from Vocabulary.com which writes,

Revelry is a wild, fun time. ... The noun *revelry* means merrymaking, but because it comes from the French word *reveler* meaning to rebel, its tone indicates carousing or noisy partying. It’s not your grandparents’ tame, sedate cocktail party: revelry is a full-throttle festive gathering, where people outwardly enjoy themselves.

In reading this, I was reminded of William Blake’s poem, [“The Little Vagabond”](#), rendered so wonderfully in [song by folk singer Greg Brown](#):

Dear mother, dear mother, the Church is cold;
But the Alehouse is healthy, and pleasant, and warm
Besides, I can tell where I am used well;
Such usage in heaven will never do well

Is there a place for revelry at church? I absolutely believe there is. Outwardly enjoying ourselves and full-throttle festive gatherings are good for the soul, which is why my other working titles for today were “the sacred art of celebration” or “the spirituality of partying.”

Yet, revelry is a tough topic to discuss right now with so many of our festive, social gatherings curtailed, canceled, or moved online. Even so, we may still feel pulled to “make merry,” to throw a party, to celebrate holidays. We see anecdotal evidence of this pull when we hear of places like Russell’s selling out of Christmas trees before December 15 for the first time ever. Or we read about the major shipping delays as gift purchases and exchanges move from in-person to remote options. Clearly many people are not just giving up on the holidays, they are digging in and making it work *somehow* . . . even if it’s not the same.

How *can* it be the same when Covid rages across the nation, overflowing hospitals, and setting sobering records? How do we *revel* in such moments? It’s complicated, I know. But *we* are complicated as human persons. We daily maneuver risk and possibility, grief and joy. Again and again, we can feel tugged by sadness *and* pulled by the urge to have some fun.

Today's Music Sunday invites us to experience these tensions. We will have boisterous music that may even inspire you to leap out of your chair and start dancing in true Revels fashion—or, well, at least tap a foot or sing-a-long. We will also have some quieter, gentler music as well as a time of remembrance and prayer that embraces the sorrows that surround us in a time of pandemic.

Both revelry and sorrow have a place in our lives.

In the [reflection by the Rev. Elea Kemler](#) that Kate just read, we heard Kemler consider how to respond to this mix of emotions in this holiday season. By sharing how her mother became lost to the beauty of the night sky, she encourages us “to issue joy an open invitation and then start paying attention to how and where it shows up.”

When is the last time you noticed joy in your life? Have you made space in your life to notice the night sky, to take delight in a bite of crisp apple, or to *revel* in a favorite pleasure? Revelry has a place in our lives by reminding us to pay attention to the possibility of joy. This is not to say that revelry, celebrating, or even partying is the *only* way to joy. But, for many, these are *a* path to joy.

Take a moment to consider some of the best parties or celebrations that you have participated in. Perhaps it was a wedding reception, a birthday party, a holiday gathering. Or maybe it was just, well, “college” and particular friends or places that come to mind. In my own memories, I might be able think of one or two such times of revelry. In seminary, for example, I had a group of friends that loved music as well as the largest space in which to gather, so my living room became the scene of several dance parties over my time at school. I also fondly remember a dance party or two here at First Parish where quite a few of you showed your moves on the dance floor, including to the tune of “Uptown Funk.”

Such times of joyous, boisterous fun can renew us—which may be just the kind of activity we need when life feels relentlessly heavy and sad. Even so, I want to acknowledge that there are also times of deep grief when such revelry feels too impossible to engage. As the ancient Hebrew prophet wrote, “For everything there is a season, and a time for every matter under heaven...a time to mourn, a time to dance.”

There is a season and a place for many different experiences and emotions in our lives. My hope for all of us is that amidst the sorrows and anxieties we may be feeling that we also dare to issue an invitation to joy to show up in our lives. Perhaps we might even find a moment or two of joy here at a church today.

May it be so. Amen.