



TRINITY EPISCOPAL CHURCH

on the Branford Green

May you find Christ, Community and Compassion within these historic walls.

Why Celebration Matters

By The Rev. Sharon Gracen

The 4th Sunday of Advent, 2010

We began Advent with the wonderful hymn “Come thou long expected Jesus.” It will also be our last hymn today – good bookends with a truly fine Advent message. Like many other of this seasons hymns it has a message of hope and deliverance. “Born to set thy people free, from our fears and sins release us, let us find our rest in thee.” Given the state of humankind, so often divided and warring, fearful and violent, we are truly in a time of Advent – hoping for the coming of Christ and the transformation that comes to those who truly follow him.

The other day I had a conversation about what might happen if all of us actually made some significant changes, did let go of our worries, and decided to live without fear. What if we actually learned how to live and love as Jesus did? Someone commented that we might no longer have need of the Church and I would suddenly be without a job. We all laughed and I said that I would be willing to be unemployed for such a good reason. But then I realized that the church is not just in the business of saving souls and teaching people how not to sin. We are in the business of celebration – indeed it is one of the disciplines in Richard Foster’s book – *Celebration of Discipline* – look at that, I’ve saved the best for last?

Celebration is the expression of joy about being alive and knowing that we are a cherished part of God’s wondrous creation. It is also a way to acknowledge the freedom that we seek in the practice of our other disciplines. During this season of Advent, we have looked at a series of disciplines as tools for our spiritual growth and freedom. First was prayer and study – prayer is conversation with God—with practice, we get better at it. Next was study, because it is important for us to be informed about our faith and to ask the big questions—“Who is God, who are we and what do we do now?” Study also leads us to an understanding of how our faith informs all other areas of our lives – how we relate to the world and how we might be part of its transformation.

The discipline of simplicity helps us live in integrity with others and the planet. Submission is the practice of being with others without controlling or manipulating. It allows us to find joy in what others accomplish, so I am betting there will be some serious joy later this evening during the pageant! There are other disciplines as well; meditation and fasting; solitude and service, confession and worship.



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Taken together these disciplines are a roadmap to a life of freedom and peace. Celebration's place as the last of the disciplines in Foster's book is not just saving the best for last; it is rather the joyous culmination of all of the other work. Because celebration is all about joy, it can manifest in many wonderful ways. It can be very natural – Max the Church dog celebrates the crisp cold December air by mad sprints in the hallway outside my office – he's also celebrating the carpeting that gives him traction – something that he doesn't have at home in the rectory. He feels good and so he just has to do something about it.

The joy of celebration can be enduring too. I had a South African friend by the name of Ntsiki Kabane Langford. Growing up in the era of apartheid, she had been denied education and subjected to discrimination the likes of which we cannot imagine. I was with her on the day that she had gone to the UN to cast her vote in South African 1994 elections – it was the first time that black citizens were given the right and privilege to take part in the governing of their own country. Her joy was so effervescent that even hours later she kept laughing and breaking into spontaneous dance – Ntsiki was celebrating; she could do nothing else.

True celebration is not some canned New Year's Eve event in a hotel ballroom with people kissing and throwing streamers on cue. It is intentional joy with God at the center. Jesus' life on earth was ushered in with angels proclaiming "good news of great joy." Our lives as Christians should be lived in celebration, giving voice and form to that joy. Richard Foster says, "Joy is part of the fruit of the Spirit. Often I am inclined to think that joy is the motor, the thing that keeps everything else going. Without joyous celebration to infuse the other disciplines, we will sooner or later abandon them. Joy produces energy. Joy makes us strong."

Celebration for Episcopalians, and certainly for us here at Trinity, begins with Eucharist – an earthly reflection of the welcome and equality that already is in God's kingdom. Every week, we celebrate God's generosity toward us, the mutuality of community, and our commitment to live in joy by and through the sharing of the Bread and the Wine. The celebration of Eucharist serves as a reminder of how blessed we are, how joyful we ought to be, and it sets us free to renew our practice of the other disciplines with vigor and gratitude. It purifies our hearts and sets us once again on the path of righteousness, right relationship with God and each other.

Then there is the celebration of life. Yes, we do celebrate at funerals. When I was in Paris, the French were always amazed at the notion of joy at a funeral. Perhaps it was the particular brand of Catholic theology they grew up with, or their sensibilities about the joy of living and how much they hated the idea of leaving that behind. We are not so constrained, and I have already been privileged to preside at seven funerals here at Trinity that were indeed great celebrations of life lived and life to come.

1100 Main Street, Branford, CT 06405

www.trinitybranford.org

203-488-2681

e-mail rector47@trinitybranford.org



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While it is certainly possible to suffer from a lack of joy, I do not believe that it is possible to have too much joy in your life. Seeing celebration as a discipline is an opportunity to reframe how we see many ordinary things. The senior member of our congregation California, 94 year old Pat Mayo is a case study in a life lived as celebration. While she has known loss, she has never allowed herself to feel lost or to interpret being alone as lonely. Every morning is a celebration of the promise of an entire day yet unexperienced. Joy is also very good medicine for her, as far as I know, she is on absolutely no medication – she keeps her heart healthy and her arteries clear with joy. She's one of my heroes.

It might be helpful to try this spiritual discipline thing backwards, start with celebration. Let your prayer be a celebration of relationships, with God, with those for whom you pray, and with the whole world. Let your study be joyous curiosity, galloping toward new ideas and fresh insight on traditions. Let the discipline of submission be a means of celebrating other's joy and triumphs. And then when you celebrate, don't hold back, let your joy be infectious, share it with others. A favorite quote from Fr. Alfred de Souza;

Dance as though no one is watching
Love as though you've never been hurt
Sing as though no one can hear you
Live as though heaven is on earth. - [Souza](#)