

Ritual and Revolution

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Rev. Martha Niebanck
First Parish in Brookline

Reading: "The Feast of Fools"

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[Human beings are] creatures who not only work and think but who sing, dance, pray, tell stories, and celebrate. No culture is without festivity. When festivity disappears from a culture, something universally human is endangered.

Human beings are also dreamers and myth-makers. If no culture is without some form of celebration, there is certainly none that lacks its share of wild and improbable stories and legends. No other creature we know of relives the legends of the ancestors, blows out candles on a birthday cake, or dresses up and pretends he is someone else.

Celebration demands a kind of unselfconscious participation that prevents our analyzing it while it is happening. Festivity is an activity pursued for its own sake. To celebrate is to live out the "universal assent to the world as a whole" (Josef Pieper). A festival is a special time in which we affirm all of life by saying a joyous yes to being part of it. A festive occasion has three essential ingredients:

1. Festivity always involves conscious excess — we dress up, take a short vacation from convention and the norms of ordinary behavior.
2. Festivity always involves saying yes to life. It includes joy in the deepest sense both because of the good and in spite of the tragic. In observing the religion of the poor and the black in America it is clear that the ability to celebrate with real abandon is most often found among people who are no strangers to pain and oppression.
3. Festivity is always in contrast to ordinary life. We cannot have Christmas all year round. The festive quality of a holiday depends on its being exceptional. Festivity, with its essential ingredients—excess, celebration, and contrast—is itself an essential ingredient in human life. The loss of festivity dulls our human psychic and spiritual sensibilities. For this reason, festivity deserves more attention and more nourishment than it has been given by theologians in the past.

Sermon

Mardi Gras, the last day of feasting before Lent, comes this Tuesday and is followed by Ash Wednesday. Priests and ministers will impose ashes in the form of the cross, saying, "Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return."

The ashes are the burnt remains of the palm leaves from the year before -- a ritual reminder of the hosannas that marked the triumphal arrival of a radical named Jesus— a remembrance of the triumph that preceded the Roman execution of Jesus, enemy of the state.

The sacred calendar reminds us of the cycle of life: birth, death, resurrection; birth, death, resurrection: “Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return.” When we know our place in the cycle of life we can surrender into each of those movements with grace, humility, and festivity. The Hebrew Bible reminds us, in the creation story found in Genesis, that God formed the first human being like a potter, breathing life into a handful of earth. This first human being is named Ha-adama, the Hebrew word for groundling, or earthling. Mud stood up and began naming the world. The earth that is the essence of our being is echoed in the relationships between the words human and humus, human and humility. “Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return.”

The common creation story of our time points to the same truth. Hear the children’s story told by UU educator Connie Barlow: “A star that lived and died before our Sun was even born made the calcium in your bones and teeth, and in egg shells and coral, moon rocks and marble. An ancient star cooked up the carbon in your muscles, and in diamonds, moths, and mushrooms. Carbon from a star is in everything alive today. And billions of years ago, a dying star created the iron that’s in your blood right now, and the iron in the comets and in the Earth’s core. (We) are related to everything else in the world, since you and all the things come from the same star-stuff. ... The elements from stars that died never get used up or destroyed or lost on planet earth. They just get recycled. Over and over. Animals and plants die and decay, and the elements recycle all over again. Some of the recycled elements now make up your own body. You are alive today on this planet earth, because of ancient glowing stars. You are a Star-kid from outer space! You’re awesome. ”

And I would add, whispering only to adults, “Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return.” Let’s light birthday candles in celebration and blow them out in remembrance — “Remember that you are dust, and unto dust you shall return.”

Which brings me back to the celebration of Mardi Gras and the fasting of Lent. Together they remind us that we are flesh and bone, flesh and blood. We are miracles born of star stuff! Walt Whitman’s poetry is at the heart of every parade and party, every excess and every breach of convention in New Orleans. Walt Whitman is the muse of human celebration: “I believe in the flesh, and the appetites. Seeing, hearing, feeling, are miracles, and each part and tag of me is a miracle. Divine am I, inside and out, and I make holy whatever I touch, or am touched from, The scent of these arm-pits, aroma finer than prayer ... That I eat and drink is spectacle enough ...”

In the festival of Mardi Gras something that is denied in everyday life is recovered. Mardi Gras ritualizes the “permanent social conflict.” It allows numbed and exhausted people “to make a revolution without actually making a revolution.” For a short time one is licensed to “let the soft animal of your body love what it loves,” in the words of Mary Oliver. Excess, assent to life, and contrast from the everyday nourishes the psyche and the spirit with a revolution in consciousness.

In the same way that Good Friday and Easter are reciprocal holidays, in that neither one has meaning without the other, Mardi Gras and Lent are two faces of human reality. Mardi Gras

reminds us that we are made of passionate star stuff; Lent brings us the humility of being part of something larger that requires the courage of surrender.

According to the texts of Matthew, Mark and Luke, Jesus spent forty days and nights fasting and praying in the desert. He was tempted by the Devil, *diabolos*, the one who throws obstacles and doubts into our minds and hearts. The devil tempts Jesus to use his supernatural powers to make a stone into bread, to use his special relationship with God to allow him to jump from a pinnacle without killing himself, to worship the devil in return for ruling the world. Having failed to tempt Jesus to aspire beyond being fully human, the devil departs and angels arrive to nourish and revive.

The practices of Lent are patterned on the wilderness experience of Jesus. Fasting and taking time for reflection are meant to expose the voices of temptation within—temptations to magical thinking, temptations to use our freedom while denying reality, temptations to power that require us to enslave ourselves to the demonic. Lent is meant to return human beings to the real ground of being, return us to earth, to humanize us with humility. Giving up meat, dessert, TV, e-mail uncovers our dependence and attachments to distractions to things that are not ultimate, things that control us while giving us the illusion of control.

The fasting of lent is meant to create an opportunity to surrender into the reality that, though we are made of star dust, and no matter our dreams of power and control, we will be recycled, and to dust we will return. We are radically dependent on a universe that we cannot control or predict. Roast beef, “American Idol,” constant email and the distractions of the Blackberry and iPhone tempt us with promises of satisfaction of desire and ultimate control. The fasting of lent is a chance to observe the temptations of flesh to divinity, the god-illusion laid bare.

Not everyone here will make a practice of going to Mardi Gras or fasting for Lent, so I add a story from my colleague, Victoria Safford, to offer an alternative within our reach. She calls it “In the struggle, singing, shining.”

“I once saw a little girl dressed in a fabulous outfit. She was in preschool, and her clothes were matched only by the radiance with which she wore them—a dress tie-dyed in bright orange, hot pink, and electric yellow, with socks to match, pink suede sandals, and on her knee, as she revealed to me demurely by lifting the hem of her skirt, a Band-Aid in the brightest bright blue. The child was shining, shining. I admired her dress and her joie de vivre, and she said, “Well, I wanted to wear my favorite outfit because we were having church today, and this is my favorite outfit.” She gave her dress a little flip and smoothed her bunched bodice. She straightened her short legs so the sandals stuck straight out. She ratcheted up those fiery socks and looked me in the eye. I thanked her humbly for her example, and wholeheartedly I meant it.

“Later in the afterglow of her costume and her gladness, I thought about that girl. There are children ... and some adults ... who unfailingly will punctuate their lives and their days with sacred celebration and rituals signifying joy, no matter what they have—or don’t—to work with, no matter what fury the world outside is howling. They will savor life and breath and all their days no matter what is dealt them. It’s the only way some people know how to live—with

gladness and cacophonous color. These are the people who pray without ceasing, awake and aware, chanting (if they are old enough), ‘This is the life I would risk anything to save.’

“There are things in this life that are so beautiful ... extraordinary ordinary blessings— that the only response is ... the kind of thankfulness that clamors for loud colors on a Sunday. ... This is a day we’d risk anything to save”

And so I invite us into a regular practice of Mardi Gras and Lent -- not just once a year-but once a week. Plan a day when you might let the soft animal within love what it loves and follow that with a day without the usual distractions of TV and email. Allow the festivity and humility to nourish joy, the life of life that beats in our star-born hearts

In a world without end, amen.