

With a baptism and other new members being received today, we have again abbreviated our entrance rite, so there was no order of confession with assurance of forgiveness.

Yet I have something to confess, and you can decide whether to forgive me.

I confess that I really don't like marching in the Pride Parade.

I dread this Sunday every year.

I hate doing anything on Sunday afternoons, especially in the summer after getting up in the wee hours to open sanctuary windows and pray for a breeze, because worship followed by the introvert's weekly nightmare which is coffee hour wear me out.

The weather is almost always hot and sticky, and I feel compelled to wear a black clerical shirt because of its visual power, given all that it represents both positively and negatively.

The parade moves slow in fits and starts and takes hours, and I am usually starving at the end of it because there is never time to grab lunch until it's over, and good luck getting back across Halsted to home.

Also, I feel like a hypocrite, not only because I'm in a foul mood waving happily to the lusty crowds but also because my calling requires me to celibate, which doesn't seem to mesh the spirit of the event.

I sometimes wonder too if my smiling presence is interpreted as a divine blank check for *anything goes*, a message of cheap grace that is contrary to the free but costly gospel Christ calls me to proclaim.

But mostly I'm just hot and tired and cranky, my typical, unreflective Sunday afternoon self that my brother has so accurately nicknamed "Mister Grumpypants."

Yet every year I walk away deeply glad that I have marched.

Every year I am surprised by the joy on the faces of people who look at me as if staring for the first time at the smiling face of a God who has shunned them all their lives.

Every year I am astonished by the urgency in their joy, the depth of appreciation and even wonder in the tear-streaked eyes of people tasting the love of God as if for the very first time by seeing that black shirt in their parade, as if they were old men running down the road to welcome home the prodigal God they thought would never come.

Every year I fight back tears when somewhere along the winding way I make eye contact with someone's naked, spiritually abused soul being touched with tender hope.

I always forget the urgency of this day, and the joy of it, until my feet and faith community walk me through and beyond my whiny self-centeredness to the place where Christ is calling me to go.

Perhaps it is the same for us when we hear this thundering thud of a gospel.

Jesus sets his face to Jerusalem and invites followers with anything but graciousness.

Any of you hear this gospel and want to follow Lord Grumpypants to the cross?

There is no permission to bury family or say goodbye or get a room for the night or even to call down sweet divine vengeance on the protesters who so richly deserve it.

There is no compassion here, no understanding, no wiggle room as Jesus wrestles in a new, more difficult, more delicate temptation story where it's not the devil floating good ideas but reasonable people floating better ones.

Who wants to march in this grim parade?  
Why the urgency, and where is the joy?

The urgency and the joy is what Jesus names *the kingdom of God*, which is hard to describe and impossible to define but is at its essence God's burning hope for a hurting world. It involves welcome for the outcast, love for the discarded and diminished, justice and peace and mutuality and equity and joy for all of humanity, which is quite a crowd indeed.

For Jesus, the kingdom of God now means going up to Jerusalem to be taken up, the word used of ascension that also means being nailed up on a cross, becoming a rejected roadside spectacle that would rip your heart and bleed your soul if you made eye contact with it.

That cross is the shape we trace on the forehead of Henry Charles and all the baptized, the shadow of despair and outline of death, the steep price of free grace.

It is therefore jarringly tough for us, if not to support the kingdom of God, to put it first.

We really baptize our children so that God will be a part of their lives, not so that our children will be part of God's.

We remain committed to our families in hopes that God will be with them but, truth be confessed, not so much in hopes that they will be with God.

We ask God to bless our agendas long before we commit ourselves to being blessings in God's.

The call of Jesus, however, rude and raw as it is, calls us to get over ourselves and either get on board with God's parade or get out of the way.

And marching in God's parade can be a pain in the everything.

Serving all people, striving for justice and peace, taking up the cross, putting the hand to the plow and the face squarely to God's future when there are bills to pay and loved ones to bury and appreciation banquets to attend is a lot worse than three hours on Sunday afternoon even to the point of being three hours on Friday afternoon.

Jesus is going there anyway, and he bids us drop everything and follow.

Drop the legitimate complaints and the reasonable commitments.

Drop the vendettas and the excuses.

Drop whatever you are holding onto and naming your life.

The kingdom of God beckons, and there is nothing better, even your own life, which as good as it might be is only a phantom's shadow of your real life which is hidden and safe...where else?...in the kingdom of God.

The way there is winding and marked by fits and starts, by protest and pain, but invisible around the corner and hidden along the way is a joy we somehow forget, a joy so deep it would kiss your heart and heal your soul if you made eye contact with it.

The kingdom of God is everything you have no idea you are looking for, but you will know it when you see it, and better yet, it will know you.

And love you.

And save you.

And cherish and celebrate you forever.

Set your face and start forward, because there's no reason good enough to look back.