***“Summertime, and the Livin’ Is….Easy” (but for whom?)***

***Hebrews 11:29 – 12:2; Luke 12:49-56***

***August 14, 2022***

***Trumbull Congregational Church, Trumbull, CT***

***Rev. Dr. Brian R. Bodt, guest preacher***

Let me speak a word of personal privilege to thank Rev. Hare for the privilege of preaching here for the next four weeks during his sabbatical. As some of you know, Tim and I are friends and served the same church – Huntington United Methodist – in separate pastorates.

I also want to congratulate you, his congregation, for helping to make his sabbatical possible. Every profession has its challenges but pastoral ministry can be somewhat unique in its demand of being “on call” 24 hours a day, seven days a week: somewhat similar to running a small business. Having had my own sabbatical in the early 2000’s, I know the importance of this time for Tim and his family, and the importance of your support to make it happen. In this era of COVID, this cannot be overstated.

So this is the first of four messages on the theme *“Summertime, and the Livin’ Is….”* What? *“Easy,”* right? George Gershwin’s 1934 opera *“Porgy and Bess”* made the opening line of Clara’s lullaby to her baby a quotable quote. Nearly a quarter-century later, Ella Fitzgerald and Louis Armstrong’s rendition catapulted the song to prominence.

The operatic context of this lyric can be obscured as we merge its sentiment with the summer experience of many Americans. Barbeques, beaches, backyards and baseball create our expectation that summertime is a time to relax, to take it easy, to adopt a less rigorous life rhythm. The positive corollary to too much sunshine and too little rain – both our experience this summer – is that we are outside more and enjoying the benefits. For some, summer is vacation time while school is in recess.

So *“summertime, and the livin’ is easy.”* But for whom? Not for Red Sox fans this year. But for Yankee and Met fans, this is your year! Both New York teams are at the top of their divisions, and prognosticators are already salivating about the possibility of an all-New York World Series. Well, if baseball is here, can football be far behind? No, it cannot. In fact, it is so close that a colleague that will not be named has asked his church to change the name of Rally Day – the traditional name associated for the September start of the Sunday School year – to “Kick Off Sunday.” Football widows of the world, unite!

So these thoughts of football, and easy living for some but not all, reminded me that although the sports world may be easy for the spectators, it is not always so for the participants. Here’s a question: what do these five football players have in common?

* Roy Riegels, captain, University of California, 1929 Rose Bowl game
* Andy Farkas, Washington Redskins, 1938, in front of the largest crowd in Detroit football history
* Harry Buffington, Brooklyn Dodgers (All-America Conference), 1947, first play of the season
* Jim Marshall, Minnesota Vikings, NFL, 1964, October 25
* Andre Parker, Kent State, 2012, first game of the season

They all ran the football the wrong way, either scoring (Farkas, Buffington, Marshall) or nearly scoring (Riegels, Parker) a touchdown for the opposing team. *“Wrong Way Riegels”* is probably the most infamous because he was the first, he was his team’s captain, it was in the Rose Bowl (the pre-eminent collegiate game) and his error caused his team to lose by the very score he set up for Georgia Tech. The livin’ isn’t always easy.

This is admittedly light-hearted. Since I don’t bet on sports and therefore don’t use FanDuel or Draft Kings, when a sporting outcome disappoints me I say, *“Well, it didn’t change my bank account.”* But there are those for whom difficult living is truly difficult. This can be hard to hear when a beautiful summer day beckons. I recently learned of a parishioner who stopped attending church because they went to church to feel good, and the pastor and the sermon didn’t make them feel good. Whatever legitimate concern is contained in this perspective, it made me wonder what they would do with Jesus’ words today:

*“I came to bring fire to the earth, and how I wish it were already kindled…Do you think that I have come to bring peace to the earth? No, I tell you, but rather division!....You hypocrites! You know how to interpret the appearance of earth and sky, but why do you not know how to interpret the present time?”* Luke 12:49, 51, 56

Ouch! OUCH! Of course, we do not need a catalog of hurt and division. There is much. But let’s touch on a few:

**Children:** the numbers, and the number of mass shootings, have become so horrifying that we are becoming numb to them. In 2020, the latest year for which statistics are available, firearms became the leading cause of death among children according to the CDC ([www.axios.com](http://www.axios.com), 5.3 deaths per 100,000 vs. 4.8 deaths from auto accidents). What can we do? In addition to the recent action by Congress, we can continue to press for universal background checks and an assault weapons ban, the latter firearm a military-grade weapon whose single purpose is to kill people. If you are a firearms owner, properly store your gun according to Connecticut’s Ethan’s Law, so that individuals under 18 cannot access the firearm. Ethan Song was a member of First Congregational Church, Guilford, CT. Their pastor when he was killed at age 15 by an unsecured firearm was the Rev. Sarah Verasco, a personal friend. Sarah, now in Longmont, Colorado, continues to advocate for gun safety, most recently in a July 10th give away of gun safes for securing firearms. Sarah’s comment to me after reading her news article was *“Every community can do this.”*

Suicide is the second leading cause of death for young adults ages 15-24 according to NAMI, the widely-respected National Alliance on Mental Illness ([www.connect.uclahealth.org](http://www.connect.uclahealth.org))  [Carl Fleisher, MD](https://www.uclahealth.org/providers/carl-fleisher), who specializes in adolescent and child psychiatry at UCLA Health, says that not all people who are considering suicide appear outwardly upset or depressed. Individuals who are self-reliant, and consider that among their strengths, may have difficulty asking for help. He observes: *"For some of those folks, relying on other people and reaching out for help has been so difficult or seems so shameful that they just can't bring themselves to do it. So they take on more and more, and think maybe that they need to take on more and more, to look strong for other people, or to be strong. And everybody has a breaking point.”*

Dr. Fleisher goes on to say that what we can do is to talk about this reality with our youth and young adults. Again, quoting Dr. Fleisher, *“What doesn’t seem to increase risk of suicide is talking about the importance of mental health, talking about the importance of reaching out to people who are struggling, or if you’re struggling, reaching out for help.”*

Let’s also consider **adults.** No less than kids, adults need a listening ear. My friend and running partner’s mother recently died. She was a youth in one of my former churches and is now a 40-something mother with two daughters. She is also executor of the estate. The last time we ran she was frustrated with herself that she hadn’t done any work that week on the estate. Her mother’s death was only six weeks before so I asked *“Who are you talking with?”*  The only sound was the slap of our running shoes on the pavement. *“I don’t want to ask for help,”* she confessed. I reminded her that grief – whether through death or any form of loss – is a process of healing that involves mourning. Elsewhere Jesus said, “Blessed are those who mourn, for they shall be comforted.” (Matthew 5:4). We are blessed when we mourn because we become open to the healing that must come from the inside out. Otherwise, the grief wound closes over and risks becoming infected. Yes, healing comes from God, but it also comes from confidants to whom we can share our hurt and struggles. One way to lighten someone’s load is to take and make the time to listen to each other.

To that point, let’s consider **all of us**. I’ve gotten some good-natured ribbing from friends about “failing retirement.” I retired in June, 2018; returned to ¾ time pastoral ministry in 2019 for 30 months, re-retired in June, 2021. By this spring I was singing in a church choir, covering for other pastors, preaching here and elsewhere, and serving as a Trustee in our regional United Methodist Conference. What gives?

I’ve always said I don’t know where I’d be without the church, without those who loved me, who showed me the way, who cared enough to stop and ask, “How are you?” and truly waited for the answer. I still need to grow in personal and social holiness. I still need others to cheer me on, and I need to cheer for others, to say “Thank you” and “God is good” and “Help is on the way.”

What about you? As Max Lucado observed, *“No one can do everything, but everyone can do something.”* What is the “something” you are called to do?

There is something to be said for cheering. Maybe that was what was missing in the experience of the worship critic I earlier quoted. Jesus cheers us and feeds us as well as challenges us. We need to be cheered and we need to be fed in the church. I like to say my responsibility is not to feed you. It is to show you what’s on the menu and introduce you to the head chef.

And here’s what we find when we’re introduced to the head chef, to the host of the banquet, to Jesus Christ: our worst moment is not our defining moment. Our failures need not define us.

Remember those wrong-way football players I mentioned at the beginning? Three of the five teams whose player ran the wrong way actually won the game! The worst word is not the last word.

That brings us to the cheering words of Hebrews 12:1-2:

*“Therefore, since we are surrounded by so great a cloud of witnesses, let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of our faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God.”*

The writer of Hebrews knows that we will face challenges. The writer knows that anytime living is not always easy. The writer knows that the world is only too happy to define us by our worst moments. So the writer reminds us in the whole of Chapter 11 of all those who have gone before us in the faith, who are our cheering section; and that they cannot be made complete without our service, our love, our devotion.

I regularly embarrass my wife in my sermons with some family anecdote. Today is no exception. Carol was a track-and-field stand out at the University of Connecticut and still holds the university long jump record for women. So I have learned much about track and field in our years together, and I close with this reflection:

The old Bislett Stadium in Oslo, Norway was a center of record-breaking track and field accomplishments. Records were broken there not once, twice, or dozens of times, but over 50 times: more than any other stadium. Why? The secret was the crowd. The old stadium only had six lanes – track and field venues typically have eight – and the noise of the crowd was on top of the runners. Competitors were cheered to record-breaking victory a record-breaking number of times.

What more need I say? This is the church at its best! Finding ways to find a hurt and heal it. Finding ways to cheer one another on. Knowing that living – at summertime or any other time - isn’t always easy living for some. Do something to ease the burden. Do it knowing that someone will do it for you, and that Jesus has done it for us all, enduring the cross so that we can be reconciled to one another and to God. Find a way to help someone. Cheer someone on. You will be helped, too. Amen.