

Rev. Sarah Carver

Proper 8

Many of you know that the World Cup is taking place right now and for soccer fans, it's a pretty big deal. Futbol, as it's called almost everywhere else in the world, is a much beloved sport and has certainly become so here in the States the last thirty or so years. Yet, when the World Cup is being played the whole world kinda loses its mind. When I was in Guatemala during one world cup you would have thought that it was the only thing happening in the world. And the swag...it was everywhere. You couldn't turn around without the opportunity to buy something celebrating the World Cup. That's even more true for us here in the States as North America is hosting the tournament. And it's not just the merchandise and hype and constant games being broadcast that remind us we're in the middle of this huge tournament; it's also people. The whole world has descended on us. Allies and enemies alike are here to represent their countries and play a game. And despite all the chaos and animosity in the world right now, it seems like things have gone pretty well.

Apparently, our out-of-town guests have found us to be very friendly, and our food to be incredible. And this is an understatement. There's a video on ABC that includes one Japanese man's take on his time here and even his very limited English could still translate his excitement at being here. He was like someone who won the lottery. People who have come for a game also have found themselves awed by Buc ees, Waffle House, High School stadiums, and Ranch Dressing...so much so, that with the Ranch, the TSA has had to remind travelers to not put the giant bottles in their carry on luggage.¹

But perhaps the most notable cross-cultural welcome is the Scots coming to the city of Boston. Now, Scottish soccer fans are not known for their subtlety. But it seems that the Tartan Army and the Boston community was a match made in heaven. Bars ran out of beer, statues had road cones placed over their heads, songs were sung, and two worlds seem to fall in love with each other. So much so that when these Scottish football fans moved on, the Boston Globe published a full-page goodbye reading:

¹ [world cup fans in america](#) YouTube.

“Dear Tartan Army,

“You came for the World Cup but gave us something more. For a week, you turned train stations into singalongs, Fenway into a football ground, and an ordinary June into something we’ll be talking about for years. Boston has hosted championships, parades, and celebrations of every kind. But we’ve never hosted guests quite like you all. Thank you for the laughter, the bagpipes, and the memories. The World Cup will move on. So will the songs, but we’ll never forget the joy you brought to our city”

“The Boston Globe.”²

Jesus is finishing his instructions on sharing the good news with his disciples. And it ends with the giving and receiving of Christ in the work and persons of these disciples...scholars mention that Jesus is referring to not just the twelve but to anyone who is willing to fashion their lives after Christ. And, in spite of the difficulty Jesus lays out for his followers, this last passage seems to end on a positive note, that reward awaits those who welcome

² <https://www.thescottishsun.co.uk/sport/16426501/boston-newspaper-message-tartan-army-goodbye-scotland-world-cup/>

God in Christ. And what might that reward be? Well, there is being a member of the Body of Christ, being a part of this mystical community, being set free from the enslavement of sin as Paul writes to the Romans, there is salvation and hope, there is being in relationship to God. And I would think that joy would be a part of this as well. Because joy should be part of faith, should be a part of our sharing our faith so that it can be a part of receiving it as well. Let me say that again because there is so much baggage and hurt in the world done in the name of sharing the good news. Joy should be a part of our sharing the good news so that it can also be a part of the receiving that same good news. Joy runs throughout the scriptures just as struggle and loss do. Joy is as much a part of the story of salvation as brokenness and sin is, but joy will remain while the others will fall away. Joy needs to be a part of our interactions with our sharing the good news.

The Roman model of evangelism after Christianity became established as the faith of the empire was fundamentally apologetic, that is, it employed the work of making a rational argument for Christianity. Also, it involved making the people

the Romans encountered civilized enough to be Christianized. This meant taking on Roman customs and language, and then, eventually, adopting Roman customs in worship or church.³ This is an imperial kind of model where the Kingdom of Heaven gets subsumed by the kingdoms of the earth. Is Christianity inherently Roman? No, remember that it is in its beginning fundamentally Jewish. Also, Jesus said nothing about being civilized. Also, I don't remember Jesus saying much about customs outside of caring for one another. And yet, we tend to practice this kind of evangelism still and I think that is where we've run into problems. We intellectualize our faith, cutting it off from our daily practices, and we create the expectation (whether we are aware of it or not) that newcomers to the faith will learn to be like us instead of like Jesus...whom we are all trying to be like. And when not everyone looks or thinks exactly alike people get pushed out and that hurts deeply.

The Celts as I have mentioned many times were very different. To preach the gospel they used their whole lives, moving into a new place to build community with the locals and in those

³ Hunter III, George, G. The Celtic Way of Evangelism: How Christianity Can Reach The West...Again. Pg. 17.

connections they planted the seeds of faith out of which grew new communities of transformation. George Hunter writes that the Celts used numerous media to communicate the gospel: poetry, song, art, storytelling, and imagination, and all done within the context of a relationship, that these Celtic evangelists really got to know the people they were evangelizing to. They understood them, they knew what they cared about, and most importantly, the Celts cared for them. Hunter especially mentions St. Patrick who returned to Ireland after having been enslaved there as a boy in order to see the Irish brought to Christ and in doing so fell in love with them and became as one of them.⁴

There is also the aspect of imagination Hunter mentions which is the imaging what could be...this is a crucial yet underutilized practice among churches today. What might the kingdom of heaven look like? Because in using our imaginations, we can bring ourselves closer to making such things real. Hunter quotes author Thomas Cahill who writes this about St. Patrick:

⁴ Ibid. pg.63

Patrick's emotional grasp of Christian truth may have been greater than Augustine's [of Hippo, who in large part shaped modern Western Christianity] Augustine looked into his own heart and found there the inexpressible anguish of each individual, which enabled him to articulate a theory of sin that has no equal—the dark side of Christianity. Patrick prayed, made peace with God, and then looked not only into his own heart but into the hearts of others. What he saw convinced him of the bright side—that even slave traders can turn into liberators, even murderers can act as peacemakers, even barbarians can take their place among the nobility of heaven.⁵

Imagination sets us free to have hope in the seemingly impossible, to be open to God moving within us and really change us. To see in every interaction we have with others known and unknown the potential for something wonderful to happen. This is the work of Joy. To keep joy at the center of our ministry as disciples is a kind of glass half full approach to humanity and all that makes us simultaneously a mess and

⁵ Ibid. pg. 75

beautiful. I would love to see Christianity interacting with the world as a body of people who know how to practice righteousness as well build community with exchanges like we are seeing between Americans and these devoted soccer fans: people who come from very different places finding themselves brought together for one thing but discovering this other joyful, wonderful, and deeply meaningful thing they didn't know they needed.

Jesus is telling his followers that they will be welcomed, that is it also theirs to welcome. It will be difficult, he has told them, but it will also be incredibly good. We modern Christians need to remember this, we need to remember the joy of the resurrection, the joy the good news brings that we seem to have forgotten. For centuries we have been trying to build up institutions, but the church is fundamentally a community, a kingdom, a place of joy and hope and a place where we learn to fall in love in love with each other and in doing so find Christ in our midst.