

Proper 9 (A) – July 3, 2011
Saint Stephen's Church, Wimberley, TX
Patrick Gahan
Matthew 11:16-19, 25-30
Come

I loved to see June end and the 4th of July come around the corner. As a teenager, I lived in much more anticipation of that holiday.

In fact, I've been thinking lately that July 4th and not November 26th should be Kay's and my anniversary. Allow me to explain: In Kay's family – the McLane's – July 4th was always a big-time celebration. Mr. and Mrs. McLane would carefully plan the menu well in advance and just as carefully invite their guests. If invited, you were expected to arrive early and leave late. For reasons unknown to me, I made the invitation list every year – even when Kay and I were on the outs...which was most all the July 4ths of our adolescence.

In stark terms, I was in love with Kay. She just didn't return the favor. There were at least two reasons for this: *Billy* and *Marcus* (The names have been changed to protect the guilty). Billy was Kay's boyfriend with the monogrammed everything. Even in the 8th grade – junior high for goodness sake – he had his initials monogrammed on the cuffs on his shirts, monogrammed on his blue cashmere sweaters and on the yellow ones and brightly blazoned across his cranberry red ones. I wanted to monogram him all right... But then there was Marcus. What can I say but that he was the Jimmy Hoffa of our village? Even at the local high school, "He would have his people talk to your people..."and you know the rest.

Yet those two characters were never invited to the McLane's 4th of July party – only me. The invitation would come from Kay. She would call and make this tepid request each year: "My parents want you to come to our house for the 4th of July." That was it. But it was enough to make me go out and buy a new set of clothes, get my hair trimmed, shine my shoes, and rev-up my prayer life.

There is a photo in one of our albums that tells the sad truth, however. It is a *Polaroid* taken of Kay and me on her back porch swing on July 4th of my 16th year. In the photograph, she has scooted so far away from my body as to almost push herself through the wooden arm rest and into the next county.

Nevertheless, I lived in spellbound anticipation that this might be the 4th of July that she would see through the monogram king and the crime lord and come to me – her soul mate and the end of her longing.

Ardent longing and rapt anticipation are the parts of the Gospel that we so often gloss over or just leave out, making the story of Jesus little more than a moral yarn, an ancient Middle Eastern

Aesop's Fable. Yet it is with great anticipation that the Good News begins – "In those days, John the Baptist appeared in the wilderness of Judea proclaiming, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (**MT 3:1-2**). In turn, Jesus takes up the same, sit-on-the-edge-of-your-seat message – "From the time (John was put in prison by Herod) Jesus began to proclaim, 'Repent, for the kingdom of heaven has come near" (**MT 4:17**).

This "kingdom" that John and Jesus eagerly announce would probably better be termed "dominion".¹ The word "kingdom" conjures up pictures of castles, kings, queens, and well-defended boundaries. "Kingdom" may have become too static a word for us. "Dominion", on the other hand, renders something more fluid. For Jesus and John to say the "Dominion of Heaven has come near" is to assert that the purpose of God is overflowing the banks of heaven and flooding into our world. The dam of heaven has broken and we must act with pressing urgency.

Thus, John and Jesus excitedly announce, "Repent, clean out the closets of your lives for a new era of humanity is coming." But the people don't get it. So Jesus confesses in disgust: "To what can I compare this generation? It is like children sitting in the marketplaces and calling to one another, 'We played the flute for you, and you did not dance; we wailed, and you did not mourn.'" The children's boredom on a hot Galilean afternoon is exaggerated by the fact that not one of them wants to play along with the game and live a little. Then getting uncomfortably specific, Jesus says, "For John came neither eating or drinking, and they say, 'He has a demon,' and the Son of Man came eating and drinking, and they say, 'Look, a glutton and a drunkard, a friend of tax collectors and sinners" (**MT 11:16-19**).

Jesus thinks that he and John have delivered their message pretty well, they have covered the entire waterfront – one was an ascetic and the other partied with whomever he was invited. Yet John and Jesus both have the same message – God is on the verge of doing something BIG in your lives.

How do we hear the edge-of-our-seats message Jesus has for us? He tells us in the next line: "I thank you, Father, Lord of heaven and earth, because you have hidden these things from the wise and the intelligent and revealed them to infants" (**MT 11:25**). Now this is not an advertisement from Jesus extolling stupidity or spiritual immaturity. On the contrary, he is talking about our posture as disciples. The "infants" of whom Jesus speaks are those who are desperately waiting for the unexpected to come into their lives. These are the ones who have recognized their need before God, much like an infant before its parents. They are not part of the social elite, the well-heeled, or the religiously astute. Those people – as now – are satisfied with the way things are and want to keep it that way. They have no desire for a new dominion – of any sort. No, Jesus is speaking to the people who are living from payday to payday – the

¹ Ben Witherington, III, Matthew: Syth & Helwys Commentary, (Macon, GA: Smyth & Helwys, 2006), 102.

farm laborers, the wage earners, and the fisherman. Also, Jesus is addressing those pushed out to the margins, sometimes by their own choices, such as the tax collectors and prostitutes.

The disciples are counted amongst these “infants.” As hard-headed and disappointing as they can be and will be as the Gospel story unfolds, when John, James, Peter, Andrew, and Matthew heard Jesus say, “(Come, follow me... they “immediately got up and followed him” (**MT 4:19-22; 9:9**).

Are we living in such anticipation, or have we allowed our lives to settle into a rut of same-ole-same-ole? Or have we been beaten into thinking there is nothing to hope for – nothing coming our way but more time spent drifting on the same placid pond of unremarkable events?

On this account, I was challenged this week by a Lutheran pastor in Chicago. He had just arrived at that parish some years ago when a woman in the fellowship lost her husband to an untimely death; then her son was incarcerated for drug possession; and finally her only daughter committed suicide. The pastor, being wiser than the one you’ve got, said something outrageous to this woman as she was “drowning in her grief and despairing of her empty, painful future.” “Thank God every day,” he counseled her, “even and especially when you can scarcely find a reason to do so.”

On many days, she said she had nothing, absolutely nothing for which to thank God, but “she summoned the courage to try, and in time thanks became a daily practice and a source of strength, hope, and eventually joy found her – not to mention a profound and unforgettable lesson given to that same pastor many years later.”²

That’s living in anticipation for something to come to us from Jesus that we can’t possibly give ourselves, and no level of tragedy, sadness, sameness, or subtraction can take that away from us. That’s having the courage to believe that at any moment the dams of our lives are going to break and the perfect love and purpose of God are going to engulf us. We are going to be swept up in his dominion. After all, Jesus himself said, “Come to me, all you that are weary and carrying heavy burdens, and I will give you rest” (**MT 11:28**).

We are all of us like that teenage boy on July 4th in Birmingham, AL sitting in rapt anticipation for the deepest desire of our lives to slide over to us. As we mature, we know that is God alone who can fulfill that yearning, so we must sit and wait until he comes. But when He comes, when He comes...it’s *fireworks!*

² Brian Hiortdahl, “Living by the Word,” Christian Century, June 28, 2011, p.20.