

10 September 2023, 15 Pentecost (Proper 18A, Track 1)  
St. John's Parish of Newtonville

Exodus 12:1-14

Psalm 149

Romans 13:8-14

Matthew 18:15-20

**La Bella Vita**  
**The Rev'd Michael Thompson, Esq.**

Let us pray.

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts beating as one be acceptable in your sight, O God, our Rock and our Redeemer, and set our hearts on fire with your love. Amen.

Hello Saint John's! It seems I've said it a million times already, but I am incredibly excited to be here with you and that we have been called together for this next leg of our journey and ministry. I look forward to meeting each of you and hearing your hopes, fears, and wildest dreams for the future. We will discern together how God is calling us to be the Church and how God is calling us to witness to and make known God's love for all creation – and we're going to have fun. I hope that you will join us after today's service for fellowship as we celebrate our new life and ministry together.

The theme of our fellowship is *La Bella Vita* – the beautiful life or the good life. What a perfect theme for our start together, and it fits so well with today's readings, which already suit the occasion. A theme that runs throughout today's lessons is that, in genuinely loving one another, we can experience *la bella vita*.

During the season after Pentecost this year, we have been reading Matthew's account of Jesus' teachings, mostly in the form of parables. Last week, though, marked an important shift. In Chapter 16, Jesus begins teaching his disciples that he will be executed and resurrected. Jesus' teachings have taken on a new urgency. These are his final lessons to his beloved before he and they experience the unimaginable. These teachings will sustain Jesus' followers during a time of deep fear and turmoil.

Here, Jesus teaches what to do when his disciples (and we) inevitably hurt one another. *La bella vita* is not about everything being perfect and rosy all

the time. Challenges will come, but we must remain in loving relationship. We must do everything we can to reconcile with one another. By remaining in loving relationship, we can do anything – whatever we bind on earth will be bound in heaven.

Paul also has something to say about relationships and *la bella vita*. Two Sundays ago, we began reading the portion of Romans concerning how we are supposed to behave as Christ's followers. The overriding theme throughout these chapters of Romans is to love one another. More specifically, here Paul explains that loving one another is inseparable from fulfilling the commandments not to betray, not to kill or steal, and not to do anything at the expense of our neighbor. To experience *la bella vita*, we must love one another, truly love one another.

The Exodus reading intrigues me most. First some context. Moses has met God and, reluctantly, heeded God's instruction to waltz up to the most powerful emperor in the world and demand that Pharaoh free the People of Israel. Despite nine plagues, Pharaoh refuses, and so, the tenth and final plague is coming.

This reading tells of the institution of Passover, a celebration that will mark the beginning of months. But remember. At this point, the People of Israel are not free. They remain in Egypt subject to Pharaoh's rule. Plus, we know that there is much more to come before they reach the Promised Land and still more after they get there.

Here, God instructs God's people to experience *la bella vita* right then and there, amid enslavement. To prepare the People of Israel for freedom and the journey and challenges that lie ahead, God institutes – again, while they are enslaved – a community celebration. God calls them to live into what they aspire and are called to be. Today's lesson from Exodus parallels what we Christians do each Sunday, what we Christians are called to do, and, more specifically, what you and I will do in our new ministry together.

God commands that each family have a lamb. Any household too small for a lamb is supposed to team up with its nearest neighbor and share one. God's people are called together to help one another, to provide for one another. And all of them are included in this celebration. If any lack the means to participate, the community is to come together to provide for them.

On our journey together, we are, likewise, called to provide for one another. We are called to celebrate who and what this place, Saint John's, aspires and is called to be. The celebration does not wait for the end of a discernment process. It begins right now, as we begin embarking on this journey and as we prepare to be who and what God has called us to be.

And there is only one way to have this celebration: together. All are invited. When grief or strife or anything else prohibits any of us from participating in the celebration, the rest of us are called to comfort, reconcile, uplift, and do whatever we can to provide the means for them to participate. We are called to empower one another to reach the fullness of God's intent for each of us individually and for us as a community as we witness to God's love. There is no "I" or "you," only "we" and "us."

The People of Israel also participate together in a public ritual. The whole assembly is called together to slaughter their lambs in preparation for the Passover feast and then to paint blood on their doorposts. What an odd sight this must have been for those outside the community! Slaughtering animals was familiar but to see this communal act – slaughtering all these lambs at once – along with painting blood on doorposts must have left any outsiders seeing it perplexed, if they cared at all.

We too are called to public ritual together – even as that ritual may seem strange to others. You'll be relieved to know, as am I, that we will not be mass slaughtering any animals. But we will gather here each Sunday to be fed by Word and Sacrament to prepare us for the work ahead. We will wrestle with God's Word in Scripture and the teachings of the Word Made Flesh. We will challenge each other into deeper and fuller relationship with God and one another. The word liturgy, you may have heard, means "the work of the people," and it is. It is our shared work to prepare us to witness to the liberating power of the Gospel, to advance God's mission of love and reconciliation in this world, to proclaim everywhere to everyone a God who will allow nothing – not heaven or hell, height or depth, length or breadth – separate us from the love that created us.

Lastly, the People of Israel are instructed to eat the Passover meal in a special way. They are to have their loins girded, sandals on, staff in hand, and to eat quickly. Why? God is not trying to inflict indigestion or deprive God's people of comfort. The People of Israel need to be ready to go. They cannot remain where they are. They must leave enslavement and enter into promise so they can serve as witnesses of God's love in and to the world.

We can't stay where we are either. We can't keep *la bella vita* to ourselves. We are called to go and witness. As we gather each Sunday to strengthen our community bonds and invite others in, as we are fed by Scripture and Eucharist, we cannot lose focus of the end of our liturgy: the dismissal. Having nourished our relationships here and having been fed in Word and Sacrament, we are called to go out and make God's love and grace known across the street, next door, in the next town, and around the world. We have places to go and things to do – and we will do it together.

In loving one another, in caring and providing for one another, in nourishing one another, and in going out together, we will experience *la bella vita* more fully than we could ever imagine.

Amen.