

Reflections of Christian Joy
LaGrave Christian Reformed Church
January 26, 2020-PM Service
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Ephesians 5:15-20, John 2:1-11, Matthew 13:44-46

Many parables start with a familiar refrain: The kingdom of heaven is like. That's true of both of these little parables in Matthew 13. But, let me start our meditations tonight with the opposite tack. Let me begin by saying what the kingdom of heaven is not like. The Kingdom of Heaven is not like eating your brussels sprouts. Verily, I say unto you the kingdom of heaven is not like a child eating her brussels sprouts. He who has ears, let him hear.

That's worth saying because sometimes we do think of following Jesus that way. Christian people, especially Christian young people, think of discipleship as a kind of bitter pill we swallow now so that we can have a greater reward later. Like a child eating brussels sprouts, you close your eyes and crinkle up your nose, you chew and swallow as quick as you can so you can get the meal over with. You don't enjoy really enjoy these bitter little vegetables, but you eat them because they are good for you and someday you will grow up big and strong. What you really want is ice cream and chocolate and unhealthy food; but like a good do-be, you deny yourself, you pick up your fork and swallow your sprouts. That's not far off from how many people feel about discipleship: the world is full of fun things, lots of pleasures out there, but when you follow Jesus you let go of all that with a sigh, and you trudge behind him.

Anyone who gives you this sort of impression of the kingdom of heaven is absolutely wrong. The kingdom of heaven is not like eating your brussels sprouts. The parable of the treasure actually describes the opposite of brussels sprout faith. Yes, this parable does talk about sacrificing everything for the sake of the kingdom, but there's no sighing, no trudging, instead there is joy. The man finds the treasure of the kingdom in the field and *in his joy*, he sells everything he has and buys it. There is no reluctance in this man. He's not moaning and groaning as he signs over everything he has and gets the deed. He's dancing and he's singing. This is the happiest day of his life. At the heart of this parable is joy. The joy comes before the sacrifice. The sacrifice comes from the joy.

Dallas Willard is eloquent on this point. He writes: "*One of the things that has most obscured the path of discipleship in our Christian culture today is the idea that it is a terribly difficult thing that will almost certainly ruin your [earthly] life.*" This comes through especially when we talk about the cost of discipleship. That's a phrase we throw around a lot, and often we use it in a somber way. "Have you counted the cost?" Of course it is important that we realize that following Jesus costs us everything we have, it's important to know that following Jesus will not always be easy, but it's equally important to know that the net effect of counting the cost is a realization that the kingdom of heaven is a great deal!! It's a bargain! You'd be a fool not to joyfully lay down everything you have for this life.

An analogy is in order. The kingdom of heaven is like a young man getting married to his beloved. There's a real sense in which he is paying a high cost for the sake of a relationship with his beloved. He is, as the old marriage form has it, forsaking all others for the sake of this one person. He is giving up all sorts of freedoms that maybe he previously enjoyed: no more playing poker with his buddies three times a week. There is a cost to matrimony and of course he should count the cost before entering into it. But a young man who is really in love pays that cost with joy! When the time comes for him to buy the ring, he writes a check as quickly as he can and he takes hold of the ring with joy. He can't wait to give it to the woman of intelligence and beauty whom he loves more than himself.

That's not just an image of how we love Jesus. That's a description of how Jesus loves us. After all, in the New Testament, He is the bridegroom and we are His beloved bride. We are His bride! His joy! He would sell everything, give everything, sacrifice everything for us. He did sell everything, give everything, sacrifice everything for us. No one has ever loved us like that. This love really is our greatest treasure.

Songs, Hymns and Spiritual Songs

Let's have a little Greek, shall we? Beginning in verse 18, this passage has a fairly clear structure in the Greek. There is a governing imperative, which is "be filled with the Holy Spirit." And then there are four subordinate participles, four phrases that expand and explain the meaning of being filled with the Spirit. So Paul says to us, "be a Spirit filled Christian!" and then he tells us what that looks like: "Singing psalms, hymns

and spiritual songs, sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything.”

What kind joy is Paul calling us to? There’s an awful lot of singing here. Are we really supposed to be people who walk around singing hymns and making music in their heart all the time? Is Paul calling us to constant cheerfulness? Is this a call for us to be inright, outright, downright happy all the time? That could be challenging for some of us. That could be a challenge for most of us. This is LaGrave. Our worship services are generally sober and orderly, not those happy-clappy services where everyone is bouncing around and all cheerful all the time. Of course, there’s something good about that. Worship must have room for lament as well as praise, church services must make room for sorrows as well as joys, for silence as well as song. But there’s no way of getting around the fact that in Ephesians 5, when Paul imagines a Spirit filled life, he sees people who are joyful in all places.

In fact, for those of us who prefer sober Christianity, we need to recognize that Paul even uses the image of drunkenness to describe the spirit filled life. Don’t get drunk on wine, be filled with the spirit instead. Let the Spirit set you free from your inhibitions instead of booze. Let the Spirit get you rejoicing and singing. We don’t all have to be extroverts, we don’t all have to be happy all the time, but if the joy of the Christian life does not shine in us, something’s wrong. If this call for upbeat Christianity maybe makes some of us sober, introverted saints uncomfortable, that’s okay. It’s very possible that Paul was trying to shake you up when he wrote these words. Because ultimately, Christian joy, expressed at all times and in all places is one of the most powerful weapons we have against the evil one.

I have a theory about what Paul had in mind when he wrote these words. I think that when Paul wrote about singing psalms, hymns and spiritual songs at all times and places, he was thinking about his experience in the Philippian jail. Do you remember that story where Paul was shut up in the deepest, darkest part of the prison? Do you remember how they were bound hand and foot and how it was pitch dark where they were? What did Paul and Silas do in the middle of the night? They started to sing! They sang hymns to God in the middle of the darkness! And as Acts 16 tells us, all the prisoners were there listening to them. *That is a powerful image of joy*: Paul and Silas singing about God’s goodness in the cold darkness; the other prisoners lifting their heads from their own sorrow to listen, trying to make out the nature of this hopeful song. It’s not an image of a phony kind of cheerfulness, it’s an image that shows us how joy is a weapon against evil. And so Paul tells the Ephesians, “As you go through the darkness of your city, keep singing your hopeful hymns, keep the song going, because people are listening.” Your joy is a kingdom weapon. Sometime this week you will find yourself in a joyless place: a cynical office environment, a nasty, tense meeting, maybe a family squabble- I don’t think Paul’s asking you to break out in a hymn at that point, but some sign of hope, some bit of kindness, some small word of generosity, some small act of love-any of these could be your hymn against the darkness. It may seem like a small thing, but believe me, people will be listening.

Happy Endings

Jesus’ first miracle in John takes place at a wedding. Is that significant? Does this choice of a wedding miracle mean something? I think it does. Have you ever noticed how many popular literary works end with a marriage? When books and movies have happy endings, they will often end with two people at the altar. It’s a kind of conventional happy ending. Many romantic comedies go this way: When Harry Met Sally, My Big Fat Greek Wedding, Notting Hill, and many others too. Many famous books end with weddings: think of Jane Austen’s work. Don’t they all end up at the altar: Mr. Darcy marrying Miss Elizabeth Bennet, Emma Woodhouse marrying Mr. Knightley, Miss Elinor Dashwood marrying Mr. Edward Ferrars, etc. etc. It’s definitely a convention in her writing. And then, most strongly of all, the convention that may be at the bottom of all these conventions, there is the persistence of weddings in fairy tales. Think how many fairy tales end with nuptials! Prince Charming kisses Snow White and then they ride off together and she becomes his princess. The prince slides the glass slipper onto Cinderella’s foot and her true identity is revealed! He whisks her off to the palace where they live happily ever after. Beauty marries the beast. Thumbelina, Rapunzel, the Princess and the Pea, they all end in a wedding where everyone lives happily ever after. That is the way of a fairy tale. Happy endings aren’t so popular with critics these days. If a movie or a book ends hopefully, things turn out all right in the end, and critics call it light. Critics call it unrealistic. Life isn’t like that they say. Life doesn’t have happy endings. Some of that sentiment is captured in the way we talk about fairy tales. What do we mean about something when we say about it, “Oh that’s a fairy tale.” We mean to say that it’s too good to be true, that it’s wishful thinking, that it’s pie in the sky.

The Gospel has a fairy tale ending. Not only does John show Jesus providing wine for a wedding party at the beginning of His ministry, John's other book, the book of Revelation, ends with a wedding. In Revelation 19, toward the end of his visions, John has a picture of the bride of Christ, eating with the bridegroom at the Wedding Supper of the Lamb. The risen Christ feeding us with his bread and wine at an eternal table. The bride is united with the bridegroom and all of us living happily ever after. Two of Jesus other parables also talk about the end time being like a wedding: the parable of the wedding banquet and the parable of the ten foolish maidens all picture the end time as a festive celebration. Put it all together and you see the entire gospel is a story where, after a long struggle, the lover and the beloved are united in a wedding feast and live happily ever after.

Some people see the happily ever after part of the gospel and they say "See! It's a fairy tale! It's just a fairy tale. It's wishful thinking! It's too good to be true!" Some people even say this in very sophisticated ways. They say, "Look, the fairy tale is a story common to all cultures and places. People have always told these kinds of stories to give themselves hope and what you have in the Christian story is another example of a fairy tale that people use to help them get through life. The gospel story is a cultural creation born out of human need." They write papers in which they cite Joseph Campbell and quote Karl Jung and talk a lot about the collective unconscious as a source for these universal images.

I think all these people have it backwards. I don't think of these fairy tale stories as a way to *manufacture* hope at the center of the world, I think people write these stories because they sense that hope that really exists at the center of the world. The gospel isn't just another fairy tale; it is the *true* fairy tale. It is the *real* fairy tale. It is the happily ever after that will truly be. The fact that all these other people and all these other cultures tell stories that end in weddings, that end happily ever after, is a sign that even in though these people may never have read a word of Scripture, even though may never have heard Jesus' name, they have a sense that the bridegroom is coming and joy will win in the end.

That's what JRR Tolkien thought. Tolkien was a committed Christian and he thought a lot about what fairy tales meant; not least because in his Lord of the Rings he wrote a really long fairy tale himself. In an essay called *On Fairy Stories* he said this: "fairy tales deny universal final defeat." They deny a tragic ending. Instead "they are a fleeting glimpse of joy. Joy beyond the walls of the world." When cultures all over the world tell each other fairy tales, it is a sign that they sense joy beyond the walls of the world. That joy beyond the walls of the world has a name. It also has a face. He is Jesus. He is our treasure. He is our bridegroom. In Him we will live happily ever after. © Rev. Peter Jonker