

“Bursting with Joy”

The Joy of Jesus – part #2

Matthew 9:9-17

[51] (Words of welcome)

Let's pray.

Lord, God Almighty, our prayer today is simple. Open our eyes, open our minds, and especially open our hearts to see what you are doing already in our world. We want to hear a fresh word from you today. Help us to understand your love for us, and help us to respond to the call Jesus has put on our lives. May the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be acceptable to you, our Rock and our Redeemer. Amen.

[52] Are there any Toy Story fans here today? Back in 1995, the voice talents of Tim Allen and Tom Hanks, among others, blessed us with an insider's view of the life of children's toys. I especially love the plot from Toy Story 2 (1999): Woody, the cowboy toy, is accidentally damaged and then stolen from his owner, Andy. Thinking nobody wants to play with him, Woody is tempted by a new group of toys to join a collection for display in a museum in Japan – Woody could spend the rest of his life being admired, but not played with. Of course, Woody chooses to go home and do what he was created to do: play.

How silly would it be to get a brand-new toy and then keep it on a shelf and never touch it? Wouldn't we want to enjoy it? Of course we would.

[53] In our current message series, we've been talking about experiencing the joy that Jesus has for us. This theme of joy, or specifically, how to overcome a lack of it, has been on my heart, especially during this pandemic. I feel like we have forgotten that the church is not a museum, it's more like party, because we have been invited to the greatest celebration of all: eternal life with Christ. It would be silly of us to refuse the invitation, both to ourselves and to others.

Scripture tells us that Jesus expects us to find real, everlasting joy in him. If the church is the Body of Christ, made up of his followers, then the church should be a place where people expect to find joy. We will find other things here, too, like brokenness and forgiveness, however, a church without joy is not following Christ to the fullest extent.

[54] Have you seen this picture before? It’s commonly called the “Laughing Jesus.” Sometimes Jesus gets depicted in religious art as somber, dying on the cross, or fierce, controlling the storm and rebuking demons. I’m not saying either is right or wrong. I am simply intrigued by the image of a laughing Jesus. This is the one who intends for us to have his joy inside us to make us complete.

While Jesus brings us joy, there are a lot of other people, inside and outside the church, who are joy-stealers, the pessimists, the ones who say, “We’ve never done it that way before.” Sometimes we call them dream-stealers. They are the ones who want to box us in and make us sit on a dusty shelf somewhere, without experiencing real joy.

[55] Jesus encountered these potential joy-stealers, too. We read about it in these passages from Matthew 9:9-17. The story starts with a simple invitation to Matthew, the tax collector. “Come, follow me.” Jesus is direct, to the point. Jesus wants to show Matthew a new life of joy through repentance and following the Messiah. The same story in Luke’s gospel highlights the fact that Matthew “leaves everything” and immediately gets up to follow Jesus. This is a radical lifestyle change.

[56] So what does Matthew do with this new-found joy? He has a banquet in Jesus’ honor. This is a show of gratitude, not a display of pride. We are told the house is totally full with Jesus, his disciples, and other “less reputable” guests. I can imagine the party spilling over into the yard. The whole town would be able to see.

[57] The joy-stealing Pharisees are close enough for Jesus to overhear, but not close enough to actually confront Jesus directly. They probably refused to go inside the house, since it was filled to the brim with these “sinners.” Instead, the Pharisees complain to Jesus’ disciples, “Look, your master is eating with tax collectors and sinners.” Their insult is clear. These people, according to their own laws, are defiled and impure. They could be non-Jewish people, but more likely, they are Jews who don’t care for all the rules and regulations the Pharisees teach.

In effect, the Pharisees are saying, “Those people are not like us. You shouldn’t be with them, Jesus. You should be with us, the good guys.”

Time out. It’s easy for us to criticize the Pharisees for their elitist attitude. But we all know we are equally guilty of thinking similar thoughts. We exclude people, even from the church, all the time. Which is exactly why we need to hear the words of Jesus again.

[58] Jesus responds, “Who needs the doctor? The sick, of course.” Doctors can use their thermometers and x-rays to diagnose our physical illness, but only Jesus can see the sin-sickness in our souls. Jesus sees the ones who were lonely, outcast, and didn’t know God. This retort of Jesus isn’t a criticism of the guests; it’s a criticism of the teachers. The Pharisees who claimed to know God should have been the ones throwing the party and telling these people about the love of God.

[59] Friends, that’s us, too. We, the church, should be throwing open the doors wide to say, “Come in here! Come find joy! Come find the Creator who knows you better than yourself! Come find love, forgiveness, a fresh start, and a community who will support and encourage each other on this journey.” When I read this story, I feel the sting of Jesus’ words on my own heart, and I realize that I need to be more like him and less like the Pharisees.

[60] Just as Jesus resolves the question at Matthew’s house, the next round of critics appears – this time, disciples of John the Baptist. Isn’t it fascinating that the ones who are most critical of Jesus are the ones who are supposed to share the same faith? This second question is also about food. John’s disciples ask Jesus and his disciples, “Why aren’t you fasting?” Fasting, that is refraining from food, is a method of self-denial practiced in order to focus on God. If you check out Jesus’ warning in Matthew 6:1-21, you note that fasting was usually done in a somber way so as to attract attention. “Ooh, look at him. He must be fasting. What a religious guy.”

[61] Again, Jesus uses a common illustration to respond. Would you fast at a wedding? Would you mourn and wail as the bride and groom kiss? No way!

Jesus uses a juxtaposition of images that normally contrast each other. A funeral is for mourning. A wedding is for celebrating. This is a question not only of what is appropriate, but also, what is natural.

[62] Let me show you a different example. What does this picture say to you? (Clowns at a funeral.) This is a real image, by the way, from a funeral home in Ohio. To honor their deceased brother, the fellow clowns wore their professional costumes. As weird as it may appear to us, this was an appropriate way for them to show their emotions.

Jesus knows there will be a day, at his crucifixion, when his disciples will weep and mourn. But that comes after this story in Matthew 9. Right now, Jesus is with his followers, and it is time to celebrate.

[63] Jesus gives two illustrations, both revealing the absurdity of this question about fasting while Jesus is present. The first is tearing new cloth to repair old material, the second is putting brand new wine into old wineskins. You know how wool shrinks when you wash it on the hot water cycle? True story: I once washed a woolen diaper, and it shrunk about five sizes, from a toddler to a preemie. Would you tear a piece of a new tuxedo to fix a tear in some old jeans? No, that would be ridiculous. And with the wine, the process of fermentation produces gases that can expand the container. If you use old, cracked, inflexible wineskins, they will burst, and result in senseless waste. Jesus says, put new wine in new skins, so the wine can be properly enjoyed.

What is he saying? Basically, stop being so foolish. Faith is meant to be experienced, not put on a shelf somewhere to collect dust. The new expression of faith, the gospel of Christ, following God’s own son, means redressing or even rejecting some old traditions. Why? We are meant to serve God in a joyful relationship, and the rules Jesus’ critics so piously followed were not getting them closer to God. In fact, they were pushing others away.

[64] This is the point where some people listening are hopeful, and others are starting to feel anxious, especially if, like me, you’ve been in the church for a long time. Is there a time and place for tradition? Of course there is. After all, our faith is informed by tradition, without a doubt. However, when tradition becomes our idol, we miss the point. God desires mercy, not sacrifice. Jesus comes to call sinners to repentance. The church is a hospital for sinners, not a country club for saints. Ironically, the most self-assured saints may in fact be the

farthest from God. Similarly, if you think you are too messed up to follow Jesus, you’re actually closer to God than you think.

So what do we do with this revelation? First, ask yourself, where are you at this party? Do you even know God has invited you, just as you are? Are you ready to embrace Jesus and live for him? Will you experience his joy? You are invited to the heavenly dance. Will you go, or will you fret because you’ve got nothing good to wear, you won’t know anybody, the music might be lame? Will you respond or just make excuses? My hope is you will be like Matthew: just get up and go. Follow Jesus. Leave behind your regrets, your brokenness, your excuses, your sin and pride. Don’t worry about what others might think. Don’t worry about impressing anyone, especially God. Be the “you” you were created to be.

Second, those of us in the church also have to ask some hard questions. Are we truly calling sinners to God? Or are we in fact building barriers to God? I believe the saddest sight in ministry is a church that no longer expects new people to walk inside, and no longer invites new people to come. All of us know someone we can invite to hear the gospel. All of us have labeled someone – too proud, too messed up, too whatever. We all must stop thinking like Pharisees and start thinking like Jesus. We need to pray for others and go to them, expecting they will say yes to the invitation.

[65] We need new wineskins in our church. Maybe we need to take a tough look at our ministries – maybe what we are doing is working, maybe it is not. Maybe something needs a makeover. Maybe it needs an upgrade.

I leave you with this quote from the Harper-Collins Bible Commentary: “The good news about God’s reign cannot simply be added to an already existing system or lifestyle. It changes everything and demands total transformation, which is why the announcement of that good news is typically preceded in Matthew by the word, ‘Repent.’ Not only individual lives, but also religious and social systems must change to accommodate this ‘gospel of the kingdom’.” (HBC, 881.)

Will we be transformed? Will we find mercy, not sacrifice? Will we seek the lost? And will we find a way to bring joy to every opportunity God gives us to reach others? I hope so. More than that, I believe, by the Spirit's power, we will. Let's pray.

Memory Verse: Philippians 4:4 - "Rejoice in the Lord always. Again I say, rejoice!"

Reflection Questions:

1. What things are "not allowed" in church? Why not?
2. What did the guests in Matthew's house discover about Jesus? What was his purpose for them?
3. Why did the Pharisees and John's disciples not understand Jesus' purpose and the joy others found in him?
4. In what ways do we need to redress our faith in "new wineskins"? In what ways is tradition not serving the gospel?
5. To whom is God sending you? Who are sick around you, literally and spiritually? Will you find them?