

THE GOSPEL CHALLENGE TO ENJOY OUR LIVES

Joy is an infallible indication of God's presence, just as the cross is an infallible indication of Christian discipleship. What a paradox! And Jesus is to blame.

When we look at the Gospels we see that Jesus shocked his contemporaries in seemingly opposite ways. On the one hand, they saw in him a capacity to renounce the things of this world and give up his life in love and self-sacrifice in a way that seemed to them almost inhuman and not something that a normal, full-blooded person should be expected to do. Moreover he challenged them to do the same: *Take up your cross daily! If you seek your life, you will lose it; but if you give up your life, you will find it.*

On the other hand, perhaps more surprisingly since we tend to identify serious religion with self-sacrifice, Jesus challenged his contemporaries to more fully enjoy their lives, their health, their youth, their relationships, their meals, their wine drinking, and all the ordinary and deep pleasures of life. In fact he scandalized them with his own capacity to enjoy pleasure.

We see, for example, a famous incident in the Gospels of a woman anointing Jesus' feet at a banquet. All four Gospel accounts of this emphasize a certain raw character to the event that disturbs any easy religious propriety. The woman breaks an expensive jar of very costly perfume on his feet, lets the aroma permeate the whole room, lets her tears fall on his feet, and then dries them with her hair. All that lavishness, extravagance, intimation of sexuality, and raw human affection is understandably unsettling for almost everyone in the room, except for Jesus. He's drinking it in, unapologetically, without dis-ease, without any guilt or neurosis: *Leave her alone*, he says, *she has just anointed me for my impending death.* In essence, Jesus is saying: *When I come to die, I will be more ready because tonight, in receiving this lavish affection, I'm truly alive and hence more ready to die.*

In essence, this is the lesson for us: Don't feel guilty about enjoying life's pleasures. The best way to thank a gift-giver is to thoroughly enjoy the gift. We are not put on this earth primarily as a test, to renounce the good things of creation so as to win joy in the life hereafter. Like any loving parent, God wants his children to flourish in their lives, to make the sacrifices necessary to be responsible and altruistic, but not to see those sacrifices themselves as the real reason for being given life.

Jesus highlights this further when he's asked why his disciples don't fast, whereas the disciples of John the Baptist do fast. His answer: *Why should they fast? The bridegroom is still with them. Someday the bridegroom will be taken away and they will have lots of time to fast.* His counsel here speaks in a double way: More obviously, the bridegroom refers to his own physical presence here on earth which, at a point, will end. But this also has a second meaning: The bridegroom refers to the season of health, youth, joy, friendship, and love in our lives. We need to enjoy those things because, all too soon, accidents, ill health, cold lonely seasons, and death will deprive us of them. We may not let the inevitable prospect of cold lonely seasons, diminishment, ill health, and death deprive us of fully enjoying the legitimate joys that life offers.

This challenge, I believe, has not been sufficiently preached from our pulpits, taught in our churches, or had a proper place in our spirituality. When have you last heard a homily or sermon challenging you, on the basis of the Gospels, to enjoy your life more? When have you last heard a preacher asking, in Jesus name: Are you enjoying your health, your youth, your life, your meals, your wine drinking, sufficiently? Granted that this challenge, which seems to go against the conventional spiritual grain, can sound like an invitation to hedonism, mindless pleasure, excessive personal comfort, and a spiritual flabbiness that can be the antithesis of the Christian message at whose center lies the cross and self-renunciation. Admittedly there's that risk, but the opposite danger also looms, namely, a bitter, unhealthily stoic life. If the challenge to enjoy life is done wrongly, without the necessary accompanying asceticism and self-renunciation, it carries those dangers; but, as we see from the life of Jesus, self-renunciation and the capacity to thoroughly enjoy the gift of life, love, and creation are integrally connected. They depend on each other. Excess and hedonism are, in the end, a bad functional substitute for genuine enjoyment. Genuine enjoyment, as Jesus taught and embodied, is integrally tied to renunciation and self-sacrifice. And so, it's only when we can give our lives away in self-renunciation that we can thoroughly enjoy the pleasures of this life, just as it is only when we can genuinely enjoy the legitimate pleasures of this life that we can give our lives away in self-sacrifice.

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