

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 most 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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UNDERSTANDING GRACE MORE DEEPLY

JULY 10, 2017

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The mark of genuine contrition is not a sense of guilt, but a sense of sorrow, of regret for having taken a wrong turn; just as the mark of living in grace is not a sense of our own worth but a sense of being accepted and loved despite our unworthiness. We are spiritually healthy when our lives are marked by honest confession and honest praise.

Jean-Luc Marion highlights this in a commentary on St. Augustine's famous Confessions. He sees Augustine's confession as a work of a true moral conscience because it is both a confession of praise and a confession of sin. Gil Bailie suggests that this comment underlines an important criterion by which to judge whether or not we are living in grace: "If the confession of praise is not accompanied by the confession of sin it is an empty and pompous gesture. If the confession of sins is not accompanied by a confession of praise, it is equally vacuous and barren, the stuff of trashy magazines and tabloid newspapers, a self-preening parody of repentance."

Gil is right, but doing both confessions at one and the same time is not an easy task. We generally find ourselves falling into either a confession of praise where there is no real confession of our own sin; or into the "self-preening parody of repentance" of a still self-absorbed convert, where our confession rings hollow because it shows itself more as a badge of sophistication than as genuine sorrow for having strayed.

In neither case is there a true sense of grace. Piet Fransen, whose masterful book on grace served as a textbook in seminaries and theology schools for a generation, submits that neither the self-confident believer (who still secretly envies the pleasures of the amoral that he's missing out on) nor the wayward person who converts but still feels grateful for his fling, has yet understood grace. We understand grace only when we grasp existentially what's inside the Father's words to his older son in the parable of the prodigal son: My son, you are always with me, and everything I have is yours. But we had to celebrate and be glad, because this brother of yours was dead and is alive again; he was lost and is found.

The older brother would not be bitter if he understood that everything his father owns is already his, just as he would not be envious of the pleasures his wayward brother tasted if he understood that, in real life, his brother had been dead. But it takes a deeper grasp of what grace is to intuit that, namely, to grasp that life inside God's house dwarfs all other pleasures. The same is true for the convert who has given up his wayward life but still secretly rejoices in the experience and sophistication it brought him and nurses a condescending pity for the less-experienced. He too has not yet really understood grace.

In his book, *The Idea of the Holy*, now considered a classic, Rudolf Otto submits that in the presence of the holy we will always have a double reaction: fear and attraction. Like Peter at the Transfiguration, we will want to build a tent and stay there forever; but, like him too before the miraculous catch of fish, we will also want to say: "Depart from me for I am a sinful man." In the presence of the holy, we want to burst forth in praise even as we want to confess our sins.

That insight can help us to understand grace. Piet Fransen begins his signature book on grace, *The New Life of Grace*, by asking us to imagine this scene: Picture a man who lives his life in mindless hedonism. He simply drinks in the sensual pleasures of this world without a thought for God, responsibility, or morality. Then, after a long life of illicit pleasure, he has a genuine deathbed conversion, sincerely confesses his sins, receives the sacraments of the church, and dies in that happy

state. If our spontaneous reaction to this story is: “Well, the lucky fellow! He had flung and still made it in the end!” we have not yet understood grace but instead are still embittered moralizers standing like the older brother in need of a further conversation with our God.

And the same holds true too for the convert who still feels that what he’s experienced in his waywardness, his fling, is a deeper joy than the one known by those who have not strayed. In this case, he’s come back to his father’s house not because he senses a deeper joy there but because he deems his return an unwanted duty, less exciting, less interesting, and less joy-filled than a sinful life, but a necessary moral exit strategy. He too has yet to understand grace.

Only when we understand what the father of the prodigal son means when he says to the older brother: “Everything I have is yours”, will we offer both a confession of praise and a confession of sin.

Ron Rolheiser, OMI