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“Fake Happiness and Real Joy”

Mark 14:1-11

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It was two days before the Passover and the festival of Unleavened Bread. The chief priests and the scribes were looking for a way to arrest Jesus by stealth and kill him; for they said, "Not during the festival, or there may be a riot among the people."

While he was at Bethany in the house of Simon the leper, as he sat at the table, a woman came with an alabaster jar of very costly ointment of nard, and she broke open the jar and poured the ointment on his head.

But some were there who said to one another in anger, "Why was the ointment wasted in this way? For this ointment could have been sold for more than 300 denarii, and the money given to the poor."

And they scolded her.

But Jesus said, "Let her alone. Why do you trouble her? She has performed a good service for me. For you always have the poor with you, and you can show kindness to them whenever you wish; but you will not always have me. She has done what she could. She has anointed my body beforehand for its burial. Truly I tell you, wherever the good news is proclaimed in the whole world, what she has done will be told in remembrance of her."

Then Judas Iscariot, who was one of the twelve, went to the chief priests in order to betray him to them. When they heard it, they were greatly pleased, and promised to give him money. So he began to look for an opportunity to betray him.

—Mark 14:1-11

Some of the most popular memes are the ones about

staying away from negative people. Have you seen these?

Albert Einstein, “Stay away from negative people. They have a problem for every solution.”

Mandy Hale, “Toxic people pollute everything around them. Don’t hesitate. Fumigate.”

Gandhi, “I will not allow anyone to walk in my mind with dirty feet.”

We do not want to be negative, toxic people with dirty feet who have no friends, so sometimes, we pretend to be happy.

Someone we know, but not well enough to tell how we are really feeling, asks, “How are you?”

We say, “I’m fine.”

We are not just lying to them. We are trying to convince ourselves that we are fine. We put on a fake smile and pretend to be happy.

When we are not feeling good, we try the things that are supposed to make us happy. Find something to laugh at. Watch The Simpsons. Get our news from Stephen Colbert. Google kittens.

Listen to happy songs—Dancing Queen, Uptown Girl, Beyonce’s country song. Sing in the shower—Walking on Sunshine, Girls Just Want to Have Fun, YMCA. Eat our feelings—fistfuls of popcorn, cereal straight from the box, cold pizza from the boxes on the floor. We try to make ourselves feel better by thinking about someone who has it worse. At least we don’t live in New Jersey.

If we really want to pretend to be happy, we could go to a parade. That is what they did on Palm Sunday. The people lining the road to the temple really want to

be happy. Five centuries earlier, the prophet Zechariah predicted that there would be a parade to crown a new king.

They have been hoping, wishing, and waiting to line the parade route. The marching band has been rehearsing, “Happy days are here again” for 500 years. They want to cheer for King David’s successor.

When Jesus decides it is finally time for the world’s most anticipated parade, they are ready. It is Passover—Israel’s Easter, Thanksgiving, and St. Patrick’s Day all rolled into one. Jerusalem is packed like Central Park for an anti-war rally or a pro-war rally.

As Jesus rides like a conquering king into his capital city, the people wave and cheer. They throw down palm branches.

They sing until they are hoarse: “Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord. Hosanna in the highest.”

Trumpets sound. They laugh, dance and sing. They are having a big time. We might think Jesus would be smiling from ear to ear. Who wouldn’t love this?

We might imagine Jesus would shout, “This is so much fun. Thank you, Jerusalem. What a great parade. What an amazing crowd. The disciples and I are so happy to be here. Let’s make this the most fun Passover ever. Give yourselves a hand.”

But that does not happen. Jesus knows the crowd is there for shallow reasons. Jesus knows that God calls us beyond fake happiness to real joy. If Jesus wanted what we think of as happiness, he would leave town immediately after the parade.

If he wants to be happy, he should get out of Jerusalem. The disciples want to go back to Galilee, but Jesus insists on this dangerous trip to Bethany. Three days before the cross, Jesus spends the night a couple of miles from Jerusalem.

The people at Simon's house think it's a normal dinner, but Jesus knows the end is near. The powerful people are looking for a way to get rid of him. Jesus is not who they want him to be. He has a different understanding of joy.

They want to be successful. Jesus tells them to love one another. They want him to do what makes sense. Jesus keeps breaking the rules. They want him to agree with what they think. Jesus keeps challenging what they think. They want him to support the congregation that's for people like them. Jesus keeps insisting that everyone is welcome in God's family. They want to be happy. Jesus wants them to know real joy.

While they are eating dinner, this unnamed woman comes in quietly with a bottle of expensive perfume—used only on the most important occasions and only a few drops at a time. She slips in behind Jesus, breaks the jar that holds her heart, and pours all the ointment on Jesus' head. This gift looks foolish to anyone who doesn't love Jesus as much as she does.

They say first to one another and then to the woman, "What a waste! The money could have been given to the poor."

It is disconcerting to think about which side we would have been on if we'd been in Bethany that day. How do you justify spilling 300 days' pay?

But Jesus doesn't feel that way: "Leave her alone.

She's done something beautiful. You'll have the poor with you for the rest of your lives and you should care for them, but I won't be here forever. This is a beautiful gift to someone who's about to die."

Judas decides that Jesus has finally gone completely over the edge. It is ironic that this story has not been told as often as most stories about Jesus, since Jesus specifically said the whole world needs to hear it.

Maybe we neglect this story because we are not sure how we feel about it. We do not go out of our way looking for trouble. Our lives are hard enough, without looking for problems.

But the problem with the approach that lines the road for the parade, and disappears when it is hard is that it might get us to something like happiness, but it keeps us from true joy. Judas' betrayal does not begin on the night of the Last Supper, but with a calculating way of doing what is easiest that cannot understand Jesus' way of doing what leads to authentic joy. Could it be that the greatest betrayal of Christ is to aim for happiness when God calls us to joy? Real joy is not for those with easy lives.

In *The Raggamuffin Gospel*, the former priest Brennan Manning writes: "We are the bedraggled, beat-up, and burnt-out. We are the sorely burdened who are still shifting the heavy suitcase from one hand to the other. We are the wobbly and weak-kneed who know they don't have it all together and are too proud to accept the handout of amazing grace. We are the inconsistent, unsteady disciples whose cheese is falling off their cracker. We are the poor, weak, sinful men and women with hereditary faults and limited talents. We are the earthen vessels who shuffle

along on feet of clay.”

“Life is hard, people fail and fall, divorces sometimes happen, young girls get pregnant, young men go to jail, and priests find themselves buried in the bottle. Yet, there is Gospel. There is God’s love.”

There is God’s joy. Our job in believing in Jesus’ joy is to, as Paul Tillich said, “Accept that we are accepted.”

We would like a Messiah who makes us happy, but God calls us to more. According to Jesus, joy is turning the other cheek, spending time with people who seem to have nothing to offer us, standing up for people who are losing to a government that is not kind, caring for those who have made terrible mistakes, and doing good that will receive no applause.

Real joy is sharing food with the hungry, holding hands stiffened by arthritis, listening to someone with Alzheimer’s tell a story, knowing that he will not remember that he told you, treating discarded people as children of God, and praying not for an easier life, but for strength.

Jesus changes the definitions. Happiness, as the world knows it, belongs to those who take it for themselves, but joy is a gift given to those who give themselves. Real joy is not shallow.

In *This is Us*, a 20-something woman asks someone dying of cancer, “How does it feel to be dying?”

The old man answers: “It feels like all these beautiful pieces of life are flying around me and I’m trying to catch them. When my granddaughter falls asleep in my lap I try to catch the feeling of her breathing against me. When I make my son laugh, I try to catch the sound of him laughing—how it rolls up from his chest, but the pieces are moving faster now and I can’t catch them all. I can feel

them slipping through my fingertips. And soon where there used to be my granddaughter breathing and my son laughing, there will be nothing. I know it feels like you have all the time in the world, but you don't. So stop playing it so cool. Catch the moments of your life, catch them while you're young and quick, because sooner than you know it, you'll be old and slow and there'll be no more of them to catch. And when (something good comes your way), say thank you."

God wants us to know real joy, but only a small number of people see it God's way. The heroes and heroines in scripture are at their best when they go beyond happiness to joy. If Noah just wants to be happy, he will not build an ark when there is not a cloud in the sky. If Abraham just wants to be happy, he will not pack up everything he owns and head for God only knows where.

They were not going for happiness, but for joy. Ruth goes with her mother-in-law when staying home would be easier. David picks up five smooth stones when the smart money is on Goliath. Hosea searches for his wife with a love that is hard. Joseph marries a young mother whose child is not his. The disciples drop what they are doing to follow Joseph's stepson. Zacchaeus gives half to the poor, when a third seems sufficient. They are not trying to be happy. They are living for something deeper than happiness.

There have been others who have found their way to joy. Saint Francis, gives up his material goods and takes his place with the poor. Martin Luther faces prison and announces, "My conscience is captive to the Word of God. God help me. Here I stand." Dietrich Bonhoeffer returns to Germany to suffer with his people. Rosa Parks sits defiantly, when it would be easier to move to the back of

the bus. Oscar Romero stands for what the church could be, even when it costs him his life.

God's joy is not easy, but it is worth the cost. God has joyful possibilities for you and me. Every once in a while, we feel the Spirit pulling us to do something joyful.

No day is without the possibility of joy. If we keep asking, "What joyful thing might God want from me?" we'll find our way to real joy.

Try telling God that you want not an easy day, but a joyful day. Pray more than an ordinary prayer. Pray that God will empty you of everything that is not love.

Tell someone who is not expecting it how much you love them. Look for words so lavish that their face and yours will turn red. Recognize how fortunate you are to be at Plymouth. Sing loudly, pray honestly, listen carefully, and give joyfully.

Do something for your church that you have never done. Pick a ministry that frightens you. Stir things up. Be the one who mentions Jesus during committee meetings. Speak to someone to whom you have gotten used to not speaking. Give a joyful offering to the church. Give more than a reasonable amount.

Be open to all kinds of difficult, joyful possibilities. God will lead us to love one another, love the church, and love Christ. Even when it is hard, be head over heels, fall down at his feet in love with Jesus.

How long has it been since you did something difficult because you believe in God? The woman with the perfume could have used that money to pay bills, but God gave her a joy that was worth everything. God offers us the same joy.