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“CELEBRATING LIKE JESUS”

Mark 11: 1-11, 2: 18-20

Life is tough!

There is a chain letter making the email circuit that reads, “Dear Church Member, This chain letter is meant to bring happiness to you. Unlike other chain letters, it does not cost you any money. Simply send a copy of this letter to six other churches who are tired of their pastors. Then bundle up your pastor and send him to the church at the bottom of this list. In one week you will receive 16,436 pastors, one of which should be just perfect for your church. Have faith in this letter, and whatever you do, don’t break it! One church broke the chain and got their old pastor back!”

Life is tough! Just ask Pastor Giuseppe!

Seriously, though, life really is tough, isn’t it? Don’t we all have a lot of burdens on our hearts as we sit here on Sunday mornings?

Just watching TV is enough to break your heart these days! When Russia invaded Ukraine two years ago, I was crushed. You see my mother was 100% Ukrainian. She didn’t even speak English until she went to school. Then there is Gaza and Israel. Not too many years ago some of us from this congregation were touring Israel and had the chance to share a meal in a Palestinian Christian home. The war is very personal to us. And what about Haiti? It’s the poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, and it’s a mess with gang violence and instability. My wife’s niece and husband have a mission there—trying to help the people survive and get ahead. They haven’t been able to go back for two years. So much trouble in our world!

Then we have the sorrows closer to home—good friends dying, others hanging on by a thread. Broken relationships in families, friendships gone sour, grieving for parents, siblings, and even children! So much trouble in life...and yet the sun still shines, the flowers still blossom, and there are hopes and dreams, and parties. Yes, there is more to life than the rough patches, but some days I wonder. Have we lost our ability to celebrate? We are so loaded down with the cares and troubles of life, so panicked by our fears, that we have a hard time letting go.

How many of you find it difficult to celebrate life because you think that being a good Christian, being holy, means living a sober and somber life? I've been criticized more than once for telling jokes from the pulpit. I've been told that "if people want to laugh, they can watch comedy on TV." Well, if you've noticed, it hasn't stopped me! We desperately need joy in our lives, don't we?

Maybe you're hesitant to get too excited over the little joys of life. Are you saving up your celebrating for the big events, like milestone birthdays or lottery winnings? But isn't *all* of life a big event?

A group of women of a certain hair color were having a good time in a bar. Suddenly one of them shouts, "Drinks on me!" Surprised, the bartender asks, "What's the occasion?"

One lady replies, "Last night we just completed a jigsaw puzzle in four weeks...and it says on the box '5-6 years'!"

Some people can find the most mundane of things to celebrate! Take Singapore, for example. Every November the people of that City State celebrate "World Toilet Day." I kid you not! To commemorate the event, they publish new ways to improve on bathroom etiquette and praise owners of sparkling facilities. The toilets are judged on cleanliness, design, and daily maintenance. Facilities all over the city are ranked as three, four, or five stars; and the best ones receive a "Happy Toilet" logo.

Just when you thought you'd heard everything!

In spite of the troubles of this world, life can be good...if only we have eyes to see it. Every single day is a glorious gift which we receive undeserved. I have a friend who regularly has "unbirthday" parties. She celebrates on the non-event days, just to revel in the goodness of life. I think Jesus would approve.

Today on the Christian calendar we celebrate Jesus' entrance into the city of Jerusalem two thousand years ago. In some ways the celebration had been in the works for more than 500 years, ever since the prophet Zechariah foretold the joy that would overcome the exiled people when the Messiah King would enter the Holy City. Jesus fulfills that prophetic oracle as he makes the Palm Sunday ride into Jerusalem. As on many other occasions in his ministry, Jesus shows us that it's all right to celebrate. It's all right to celebrate!

Jesus had come from Galilee, following the usual road through what is today Jordan until he crossed the Jordan River at Jericho. From there he began the steep climb up to the Golden City, the capital of the Jewish nation. The closer he got to the city, the more pilgrims converged together. Jesus himself was traveling in the midst of many from Galilee, for it was required that all male Jews 25-years-old and older who lived within 50 miles of Jerusalem come to the city to celebrate the Passover Feast. When Jesus reaches the back side of the Mount of Olives, he sends two disciples to get a donkey. They bring it back and set him on it. As he rides

along, people throw their cloaks on the road ahead of him to cushion his ride and spread palm branches before him to celebrate his coming to deliver them. With loud and boisterous voices, they shout, **“Hosanna! Blessed is the one who comes in the name of the Lord! Blessed is the coming kingdom of our ancestor David! Hosanna in the highest heaven!”**

What do you think Jesus was experiencing when he was the object of so much adoration and praise? Can’t you just see him waving to the crowds, smiling and laughing and eating it up? I can. There had been so many hard days in his life, so many sad times, so many days of doubt and problems with the people—even with his own disciples. But Jesus wasn’t living in the past. Jesus was living in the now, the present moment, and *now* life was good, very good.

Can you find the good in life in the present moment? Can you let go of life’s troubles long enough to feel the joy of life’s goodness? Jesus shows us that it’s all right to celebrate.

In this Palm Sunday story there are two things that make Jesus’ ability to celebrate especially noteworthy. There are two aspects of this Palm Sunday party that could easily have kept Jesus from celebrating, but they did not.

First of all, Jesus shows us it’s all right to celebrate even when others criticize us for it.

Have you ever sold the farm and gone on a dream vacation, or broken out a bottle of expensive wine, or danced up a storm, or laughed yourself silly, only to have people look down their noses at you as if to say, “What right do you have to be so happy?” I have. Some people want to keep adding things to their homes. I don’t have any more room in ours; I’d rather keep adding to my memories! Some people want to keep a lid on joy; I want to pop the corks—as many as I can. Some people want to march to the death dirge (the song I played in every Memorial Day Parade as a band kid); I want to dance polkas and waltzes. Some people want to keep a straight face so their makeup doesn’t run; I want to laugh so hard I cry. Where did I get such a cockamamie idea? From Jesus! Jesus shows us it’s all right to celebrate even when the critics are out in full force.

When Jesus sent his disciples to fetch the donkey, he predicted the obvious. Some people would be asking, **“Why are you doing this?”** There were doubters. And Luke’s Gospel tells us that when the crowds were going wild in celebration of Jesus’ coming into the city, the official sourpusses in the crowd, the Pharisees, said to Jesus, **“Teacher, order your disciples to stop.”** Jesus answered them, **“I tell you, if these were silent, the stones would shout out.”**

These incidents fall into the same category of so many others in Jesus’ ministry when he was criticized for doing something right. In our second Gospel lesson for today, Jesus was criticized for not having his disciples fast like John’s did and the Pharisees’ did. Jesus responded, **“How can the guests of the**

bridegroom fast while he is with them? They cannot, so long as they have him with them.” And how many times was Jesus railed against for doing good on the Sabbath? Jesus was criticized for forgiving people, for casting out demons, for teaching hard teachings, for associating with sinners, for helping Gentiles and Samaritans, for blessing children, for breaking ritual laws, for being a pacifist, for having women disciples, and so much more. At every turn Jesus was assailed by critics...but he never gave in.

It's hard not to give in. As someone has said, "Too often we succumb to 'hardening of the oughteries' as we try to fill someone else's definition of who we 'ought to be' and how we 'ought to behave.' It's a constant battle. The poet e.e.cummings, whose trademark was printing his whole name in lowercase letters, wrote, "To be nobody but yourself in a world which is doing its best, night and day, to make you like everybody else, means to fight the hardest battle which any human being can fight, and never stop fighting."

If you get too much into celebrating, your detractors will come out of the woodwork. You've heard the expression, "Build it and they will come." Well, I say to you, "Throw a party and they will come"—not just the guests, but the critics, too—those who have a grudge against joy. Be too happy, and they will come to scoff and deride you! There are a lot of people in this world who seem to have something against happiness. Most probably it's because they haven't had enough of it in their own lives, and they are jealous of those who do. And it's not about lucky breaks and material possessions, either! The happiest people I have seen are those who have the least in this world.

A couple of weeks ago I gave a small notepad and pen to the woman who lives in the woods behind our church, telling her to write down some things she might like to have. I talked to Brenda this past week to find out what was on her list. She told me she didn't write anything on the list. She wanted nothing. Living in a tent with no stove, no washer and dryer, no toilet, no refrigerator or panty...yet she wanted nothing. Think about *that*!

In reality, the critics who complain about life have had pretty much the same chances for joy as everyone else. It's really about attitude.

Someone has written, "A pessimist is one who feels bad when he feels good for fear he'll feel worse when he feels better." How many pessimists do you know? How many people do you know who feel bad when they feel good? How many do you know who never let themselves go with abandon because they are afraid of hitting a pothole in the road and losing themselves in trouble? I hope you're not one of them!

Jesus shows us that it's all right to celebrate even when others criticize us. I don't know about you, but I'm headed for a party. Whatever life brings my way, I'm still goin' to that party! It's a banquet, hosted by none other than Jesus himself

in the new kingdom. What a bash it will be! It will be the best party you've ever been to, and it will last forever!

Don't let the naysayers get to you. Celebrate even when the critics put you down. Jesus shows us it's all right.

The other thing that makes Jesus' ability to celebrate noteworthy is the fact that he knew what lay ahead. Most of us are glad we don't know the future (although I wouldn't mind having a little insider information on the stock prices in 2025). Mostly, though, we don't want to know ahead of time about all the trying times we will face in life. But Jesus knew. Jesus knew a lot about what was coming, and it saddened him greatly. Even so, it didn't dampen his ability to celebrate the moment. Jesus shows us that it's all right to celebrate even when tough times are coming.

Now some of you may be thinking, "Doesn't it say in Proverbs that it's foolish not to plan for the future like the ant storing up provision for the lean days?" Indeed, it does! But that doesn't mean that we can't enjoy the day. Every spring up north we celebrated the return of life even though we all knew that the flowers and plants would eventually succumb to the freezing temperatures of the next winter. I'm not calling you to foolishness, but to wisdom. The only life we have for sure is the present moment! All the past is gone, and all the future has not yet arrived and may never arrive for some of us. We have no guarantees. Those Social Security payments so many of us count on to make it, may stop someday if politicians get their hands on them. We may end up poorer than the proverbial church mouse. Should we sit around and stew about it? That's one option. It's not the one I choose, nor do I believe the Lord would be stewing over the possibilities of future trouble. After all, was it not Jesus who taught, **"Do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own."**?

Mark Twain wrote, "I've had a lot of worries in my life, most of which never happened."

"Well," you may say, "It's easier to let go of worrying about what *may* happen than not to worry about what we know *for sure* will happen. Indeed, but Jesus knew exactly what *would* happen to him—and it wasn't pretty.

Jesus knew that the religious leaders of the day would go after him. He knew they would humiliate him. He knew that horrible flogging and mockery were in store for him. Jesus knew that the nation would turn against him and that he would end up stripped and nailed to a cross like a common criminal. He told his closest friends three times about it! Jesus even knew that he would feel forsaken by God; that was his struggle in the Garden of Gethsemane where he sweat blood. All of this terror, all of this horror was in the crystal ball of his future—in the very next few days. This Jesus who came to rescue the world would have no one to stand up

for him in the end. The physical pain, the emotional trauma, the spiritual abandonment were all ahead. Jesus knew it.

What's more, as Jesus came over the top of the Mount of Olives, Luke tells us that he wept over the City of Jerusalem because of what he foresaw in *their* future, too. These blind residents of God's City would be destroyed. Less than 40 years later the Romans laid siege to Jerusalem and eventually leveled it to the ground. Those times were horrific—the people who tried to escape were crucified by the hundreds, and those who remained became so hungry that they ate their own children. The priests killed one another in the temple precincts itself, and after killing most of the city's inhabitants, the Roman army pulled down Herod's magnificent temple and left it in ruins until this very day. Nothing remained but the foundation which we call the Wailing Wall.

Jesus knew that all this was coming—all this terror for Jerusalem and all the horror of his own death. Even so, the Lord did not borrow trouble from tomorrow. He refused to succumb to fear. He showed us that we can celebrate today even when we know that hard times lie ahead.

In his book *When All You've Ever Wanted Isn't Enough*, Rabbi Harold Kushner wrote, "If logic tells you that in the long run, nothing makes a difference because we all die and disappear, then *don't live in the long run*. Instead of brooding over the fact that nothing lasts, accept that as one of the truths of life, and learn to find meaning and purpose in the transitory, in the joys that fade. Learn to savor the moment, even if it does not last forever. In fact, learn to savor it *because* it **is** only a moment and will not last. Moments of our lives can be eternal without being everlasting."

If you think you're going to escape trials and tribulations in the future, just go visit a nursing home or look around you at the dear people who are facing illnesses and sorrows, or look in the mirror and see the fading glory! We all know that the road ahead leads toward disease and death. Yet even in the face of trouble, even when we know tougher times are coming, even then we can celebrate. This is not some stick-your-head-in-the-sand philosophy that denies the truth. It's a philosophy that accepts the truth wholeheartedly but refuses to be so narrow-visioned as to see only the pain of life and never see the blessings of God. Did not God give us affections? Did not God create in us emotions? Is not God the Creator of joy, the Creator of laughter, the Creator of praise? It's all right to celebrate this precious day of life even when the road leads downhill to worse. It's all right to celebrate when darkness threatens. It's all right to find hope even in the midst of death itself.

When I was a child, I attended many a family gathering after a funeral for my Ukrainian relatives. At those receptions there was crying and sorrow; there was remembering with tears and laughter; and there was dancing—dancing in the face

of death! I learned that nothing was beyond hope. The darkest days could not quench the light of God's hope. Jesus asked, "**How can the guests of the bridegroom fast while he is still with them?**" Dear family, is not Jesus with us today and always?

Every Sunday we hear the question, "People of Nativity, what is our mission?" And we answer, sometimes mindlessly, "With the birth of Jesus in our hearts, we bring light and love to the world." Light and love are good things—things that lift up and heal, things that bring joy. To whom are we called to bring such joy? To the world! To the brokenhearted and oppressed, to the undervalued and rejected, to children and elderly, to black, brown and white, to gay and straight, to the people of Glen Lakes and Timber Pines and those who are living in the woods, to people who love you and people who don't—to the *whole world*. But here's the thing: If you want to bring joy and blessing to the world, you have to experience it for yourself first.

Life is tough, not just for you, but for everyone. Critics abound. Troubles loom large. Yes, the Passion is coming! Yes, troubles are on the horizon! But don't let these things plunder your present joy. This very day your King and Lord passes by. Let your hosannas ring out so that all the world knows that Jesus is with us. We have hope for the future! It's all right to celebrate.

Amen.