

## Joy to the World

adapted from "Ministry: Authorized or Unauthorized?"

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The Bible doesn't speak for itself. It requires readers. By readers, I don't mean people who know how to pronounce its words or who, in addition to knowing how to pronounce its words, know the meaning of each word they pronounce. By readers, I mean people who make the effort to hear and understand what is being said, what is being done, and by whom. To better understand the significance of those actions, it's always helpful to know at least a little bit about the context within which these words and deeds took place.

You may be asking why it's so important to understand these things. Have you ever been a member of a book club? Everyone has a different opinion about an action taken in the novel and everybody respects these different opinions, but nobody seems interested in resolving the differences. Does that matter? I believe it does when it's the Bible we're reading. To explain why it matters, allow me to quote Ched Myers, author of *Binding the Strongman*: "Skeptics enjoy pointing out that the Bible has been used to justify all kinds of contradictory positions, as if the fact that a text can be made to say anything means therefore that it has nothing itself to say."

I'm hoping this story from Mark will be given the opportunity this morning to say something instead of nothing. More importantly, I'm hoping we will be open to hearing what that something is. Even more importantly, I'm hoping that by hearing what that something is we'll leave here wearing a different pair of glasses.

We need to get one thing straight about this passage. There's more here than meets the eye. It isn't just one of those touching stories about Jesus' so-called miracles. Nor is it simply another one of those stories that demonstrate the compassion of Jesus, which in this story happens to be for the poor leper. Nor is it, what we might call today, a motivational story, which in this story, is encouraging us to have "quiet times" with the Lord in the privacy of our prayer closets. This isn't a story of one offs, of what we might think of as "doing a good deed". The one thing we need to get straight about this story is that it isn't about the ways we go about tweaking ourselves or the status quo. No, this is a story about one thing: it marks the radical eruption of the Kingdom of God on earth. Jesus enters the scene and the Kingdom of God bursts into life. Not only did this happen unexpectedly; it happened, from the perspective of the religious establishment, in the most unauthorized of ways.

"The most unauthorized of ways." Because that may need explaining, I'll give two examples: the first fictional, the second historical.

Imagine how the Ministry of Transportation would react if I set up a tent and table in the Argyle Mall parking lot and started handing out driver's licenses to people. It's easy to imagine their first reaction: Who is this guy, who does he think he is? Their second line of inquiry would likely be: What's he doing, what's he up to? And what would my actions be saying in reply to these questions from the officials? They would be saying that I believed I had the authority to license people to drive. My actions would also represent a critique of the Ministry. They would be saying that I believed the Ministry of Transportation had blown it, that they had misused its authority to license drivers, and that I had come to take over that authority.

To illustrate my second example of unauthorized action sending a message, I will again borrow from Ched Myers:

When Martin Luther King Jr. knelt and prayed in the face of police dogs and water cannons, or when his colleagues sat at lunch counters or at the front of city buses, they weren't simply kneeling, praying, and sitting. They were sending a message; they were engaging in symbolic action. Through their actions, they were not only confronting the dominant order of oppression, they were also demonstrating different possibilities.

This is what Mark 1 is all about. Jesus is engaging in unauthorized prophetic activities. It's unauthorized because his actions are in contravention of Leviticus, Section 13, and all its subsections!! Doesn't he know that the Temple is where God does his work, where healing is obtained? Doesn't he know that a priest must preside over the ritual cleansing? The leper seems to know. He seems to know that by approaching Jesus, a non priest, he is violating Leviticus 13. But Jesus is doing an end run around the whole system. He's dismissing the Temple, the dead center of Israel's religious life. Through his actions, Jesus is denouncing the current establishment: the Temple and its official leadership under the priests. And to make that clear to the authorities, the cleansed leper is instructed to return to the Temple, not so much to publicize the miracle, as to witness against its purity code. The man, unable to contain his joy, instead spreads the news, talks freely of his release from sin and shame.

Temple-language is all about purity: Who's pure, what makes you impure, and how you might become pure again. Because this kind of language may sound strange or outdated to our modern ears, maybe it would be helpful to hear this Temple-talk in more familiar terms. It's the language of "us" and "them," the game of winners and losers; it's the language - legislative or cultural - that creates the line between insiders and outsiders: who's an insider, what makes you an outsider, and what outsiders need to do before they can be counted as one of us. From the outside, from the perspective of outsiders, the Temple had become an instrument of marginalization and oppression. As Jesus would say later when he cleanses the Temple, it had become a place of exploitation, a den of thieves, a haven for unfaithfulness to God.

Jesus steps in and turns this social order on its head by redefining what purity and impurity are. He engages in a prophetic protest against the whole Temple system, the whole Israelite understanding of God and his ways in the world. But Jesus isn't just confronting the central symbol of Israel's identity; he is also undermining Israel's carefully crafted military-political truce with Rome, Israel's occupiers, the power reinforcing the oppressive tone of life. Jesus is defying the whole oppressive system, but Jesus doesn't give that even a second's thought. He's a man on a mission to heal the sick, to release the captives, to restore the brokenness, in whomever and wherever it is found - even if it takes him to the remote region of Galilee. Think of it as Jesus taking it to the streets.

Which is what shocks everyone and starts such an uproar throughout the whole region. Who does this Jesus, the carpenter's son, think he is?...God?

But Jesus shows that if you really want to be doing God's will, if you really want to be where God is at work, it will mean working the periphery, the boundaries. It will mean opening doors for the poor, the outcast, the marginalized, the ostracized, all the lepers of the world who find themselves on the outside due to the self-righteousness and self-interest of the insiders. And yes, it will mean a thorough overhaul of Israel's assumptions and beliefs, starting with their belief about the Temple. And yes, it will mean repentance.

The leper knows the pressures Jesus faces: will he toe the line and stick with the script? Will Jesus abide by the rules, the written and the unwritten, and keep his distance or will he cross the line? This is why the leper “dares” Jesus to heal him. And this is why Jesus is indignant: Toeing the line isn’t an option when the unauthorized way is the only way. Of course Jesus is willing. He’s willing because he has come to do God’s will, which is to bring joy to the world ...no matter the cost.

“Cost” - It’s one of our least favorite words. That’s probably because we’d much rather talk about income, revenue, returns, or if not those, at least the bangs we got for our bucks. But “cost” here is not a reference to the cost of groceries, fuel, labor, or what have you. The cost in Mark 1 is that Jesus will need to carry out his mission like a freedom fighter: out in the wilderness, staying clear of the centres of power, hiding in caves, meeting in secret with his followers. All of which point to the end of Mark’s Gospel, where we find Jesus, who had been arrested and condemned under Israel’s “letter of the law” interpretation of the Law, outside the city of Jerusalem, hanging on a cross, suffering the consequences for taking direct, unauthorized action against the Temple leadership. And yet, through this beaten and crucified rebel, the Kingdom of God was birthed into the world. Was it worth the cost?

All of us know about “the pursuit of happiness”. It’s represented almost everywhere we go. Signs, signs, everywhere signs. Just follow the simple directions beneath the smiles and the laughter and you will be happy too. But does chasing down these signs pay off, do they deliver the goods?

When we were living in London, a young couple from Poland moved next door to us. They had followed the signs. For several years, they had followed the directions beneath the frozen smiles and the painted laughter, but they weren’t all that happy. In fact, they were more weary, more disheartened than happy. For them, the pursuit of happiness had proved much harder than they thought it would be. They never imagined the pursuit of happiness would cost so much, that it would mean much more pursuit than happiness. Before moving to Canada, they had lived a few years in Greece. They told us they wished they had stayed in Greece. There happiness hadn’t cost them the price of their souls. There it had seemed to fall into their laps. Sounds heavenly. You might be thinking that’s just one couple’s experience with our pursuit of happiness. But is it? Sometimes it takes an outsider to see what insiders fail - or refuse - to see. What do we need to see? We need to see that what’s operating underneath what is being sold to us as the pleasant and benign pursuit of happiness and peace is the rapacious pursuit of power and profit. We know that money-oriented engine by its fumes: Commodification and Consumption; Division, Death, Destruction. Gaining the world at the cost of losing the world. Worth the cost? There continue to be people who think it is, but their number is dropping.

Let me now turn to Hebrews 12:2: “For the *joy* set before him Jesus endured the cross, scorning its shame, and sat down at the right hand of the throne of God.”

“For the joy set before him.” It sounds like Jesus lived and died in pursuit of joy. Would his life, our lives, have been any different if he had pursued happiness instead? I know the question sounds ridiculous, but bear with me. I don’t think this is just a question of semantics: joy, happiness, six of one and a half dozen of the other; what’s the difference? No, the question is more like the difference between life and death. Why? Because to imagine Jesus pursuing happiness would be, in effect, to see the Jesus of history disappear.

We know how a society that pursues happiness behaves. We know how it looks and how it feels. It's a culture we've come to tolerate even as it drains our hopes. It's exploitative, manipulative, suspicious, artificial, superficial, egocentric, stressful, lonely. And it's this way, I think, because the happiness sought is usually our own and, like bubbles, occasional and short-lived. If that's a fair description of a society in pursuit of happiness, then I think a society that chose to pursue joy, as Jesus did, would be different. How different would it be? There would be a world of difference. In other words, I believe that the pursuit of joy would bring about a very different world from the one we live in now.

The pursuit of happiness, when looked at closely enough, is little more than a rat race. Staying in that race will likely mean a leaner and meaner future. Survival of the fittest. Snooze, you'll lose. That kind of a thing.

What our increasingly hostile, dog-eat-dog world needs, has always needed, is a stable influence. That stable influence was born in a manger...for God so loved the world, he became one of us. That's not pragmatism; that's the wisdom of God, the truth of God's grace.

Jesus, the man for others, brought joy to others. especially, and first of all, to the least of these, those the winners call losers and a waste of time. The powers that be were not impressed by Jesus' actions. Like a Richter Scale, they were quick to realize Jesus was doing something. His stable influence threatened the dominant social order. It undermined the credibility of the rulers and their overruling narrative. Bringing joy to others, especially those judged unworthy of grace, was something that threatened their hold over people's lives. This was serious. Everything was at stake. Jesus was doing something that had to be arrested if they were to stay in control.

"Hallowed be your Name, your kingdom come, your will be done on earth as it is in heaven" involves our will, our desire to work with God in bringing the new life down to earth.

Sowing the seeds of a new social order, one of inclusivity instead of exclusivity, one of justice instead of inequality, one of generosity instead of greed will produce mixed reactions. High-flying insiders - the mountains - will respond with alarm and anger. They will seek to break and bury the light. The low-lying outsiders - the valleys - on the other hand, will be filled with joy.

To pour light over darkness. To become active in bringing joy to the world. It's what we're called to do, and it cannot be done if we're hesitant about crossing the lines that have been drawn for us. Following Jesus will take us beyond the expectations of society, off the well-traveled road. Crossing the lines of authority and middle-class respectability requires faith in the Light of the World. To exist for others, as Jesus did, will also require that we cultivate a deep confidence in the Gospel message, rooted in prayer and worship. In doing so, we build a resistance to the forces that cultivate the darkness, the ones that drive us apart, that pit us against each other. Following Jesus doesn't put you on the road to unswerving happiness. Making waves, disturbing the establishment in the Name of Jesus opens the door to deep disappointment and suffering. Those are the crosses we will need to carry. Follow Jesus if it's joy you're after, the joy of setting other people free to discover how they, too, might bring joy to others. The Kingdom of God is here in our midst and through the work of God's Spirit, people are being set free to live joyfully in its liberating grace.

The joy of the leper was just the beginning. The end of the story is joy to the world. Jesus saw the finish line - the mountains brought low; the valleys raised up - and it brought him joy.

So let us also lay aside every weight and the sin that clings so closely, and let us run with perseverance the race that is set before us, <sup>2</sup> looking to Jesus, the pioneer and perfecter of faith, who for the sake of the joy that was set before him endured the cross, disregarding its shame, and has taken his seat at the right hand of the throne of God. <sup>3</sup> Consider him who endured such hostility against himself from sinners, so that you may not grow weary in your souls or lose heart.