

Joy from the Clarity and Growth that Jesus Brings based on Luke 9: 28-36, David Jahnke, 2/26/17

I am doing a mini sermon series on Joy. And last week I talked about faith being the root of joy. And how faith is manifest and living in the here and now via love, peace, patience, kindness, gentleness and self-control, among other virtues. And how we either we believe these invisible things are real (and thus believe in God whether we want to give it that name or not) or we think these things are immaterial fluff and are thus condemned to a meaningless, futile and sinful existence.

I think everyone has an intuitive sense of these things alive in our conscience. This is why the apostle Paul says we have no excuse for a life without joy and striving for virtue. And our intuition finds its rock-solid foundation and its most concrete expression in the life and ministry of Jesus.

Even great but skeptical statesmen like Thomas Jefferson and Winston Churchill saw something unique and powerful in the life and teachings of Jesus. In 1941, Churchill was discussing the task of rebuilding the world when the war would finally end. He said:

‘We could find nothing better than Christian Ethics on which to build. And the more closely we follow the Sermon on the Mount, the more likely we will be to succeed in our endeavours.’ 150 years earlier, Jefferson thought the same about Jesus’ ethics.

My first point is we must not rush to judgment or be afraid of the seemingly skeptical among us. Paul said to leave judgment of the non-Christian to God. And he wrote this about them:

“What can be known about God is plain to them, because God has shown it to them. 20 Ever since the creation of the world his eternal power and divine nature, invisible though they are, have been understood and seen through the things he has made.” Romans 1

The most poignant thing God has made and which points to God is us because we are made in God’s image. And this means we have a basic awareness of the invisible things of God-- what is good and right.

I remembered arguing with my best friend who had taken our youthful skepticism to its logical but dangerous end of extreme moral relativism in which there is no right and wrong or good and bad. While I was leaning in this direction in both with my behavior and my worldview, I could not seem to completely shake the feeling in my gut that there had to be truth and goodness.

And I think that's true for most people. Even if they shake off God for a while, they do not shake off faith in the things of God. But then we are left wondering how we can really know these things? And what do we do with these intuitions?

There are a couple of dangers to avoid. The first is to give up on knowing them and refusing to entrust ourselves to and commit to them. The danger there of course is accepting various levels of reckless and self-centered and hedonistic and materialistic living.

The other common error is making God in our own image which means accepting our fallen world's very limited ideas of what is good and right and divine. **Even someone with as great a mind as Thomas Jefferson could fall prey to this. He regarded Jesus...**

...as a 'master workman', whose 'system of morality was the most benevolent and sublime probably that has been ever taught'. Jesus was 'sensible of the incorrectness of his forbears' ideas of the Deity, and of morality', and he had 'endeavored to bring them to the principles of a pure deism. [That's the concept of a watchmaker God who is not involved in the inner workings of the watch/ this creation once he has created it.] Continuing... [Jesus sought to bring his society to] more just notions of the attributes of God, to reform [its] moral doctrines to the standard of reason, justice, and philanthropy, and to inculcate the belief of a future state.'⁹ [Jefferson believed in a Jesus], that is, [which] was very much like Jefferson [himself.] [Both quotes from E.P. Sanders' Historical Figure of Jesus]

The great scholar Albert Schweitzer put this best when he said that the first quest for the historical Jesus which was from Jefferson's day at the end of the 18th century to the beginning of the 20th dug and dug and, time and again, found at the bottom of their search for Jesus a mirror which simply reflected their own presuppositions about Jesus. So if even great scholars are inclined to find a Jesus which fits their previous conceptions and worldviews, the same goes for us and *our* ideas about Jesus and God.

And if we have been well-trained in both the complexity and the simplicity of God; both the breadth and the clarity of who Jesus is and how His Spirit is at work in the world, we will be fine. But in far too many places this is not happening and people are left to try and construct value systems and spiritual lives out of their conventional moral reasoning and the norms of the fallen world around them. And there just is not sufficient personal energy or social clarity to draw on.

You can get along o.k. with this as a fallen human being but your true self will not be set free and our joy will be hindered. Because when we do not attend to our spiritual lives, two things happen. 1. We too easily fall back on doubt, insecurity and the acceptance of sin. 2. And second, we end up with a very conventional and false Jesus who affirms our fallen worldview and our lifestyle, instead of a Jesus who affirms us as his brothers and sisters while calling us to accept *his* worldview and lifestyle. Christian acquiescence to culture is everywhere in the modern church and all the great spiritual men and women of the last two centuries have lamented this and tried to correct it.

And here the Jesus of the gospels bursts in and wants to broaden and clarify everything. In today's passage takes three of his closest followers up on a mountain to pray. I must pause here and say that prayer is both the beginning and the primary means of receiving the joy that God wants for us. Prayer acknowledges the greatness of our God and thus leads to awe and peace.

I was going to just talk more about this, but then I realized it would be better to simply pray it. So let us pray and I am going to have you repeat after me just as we have the children repeat. Yes I am going to make you uncomfortable. So please pray and repeat quietly or boldly...

“You O God, are much bigger than anything in this world; much bigger than any trial I might face; much bigger than any conflict in my life; bigger than any broken people around me; bigger than my own broken-ness; bigger than my simplistic; and my limiting ideas about You. So I now open myself up; to Your creative power; to Your transforming presence; to Your amazing beauty and peace...; show yourself to me. Transfigure the world around me; the world your Son Jesus loves so much; do this so that I might see and feel you; and hear and know you more. In Jesus' name I pray. Amen.”

Thank you. Prayer on a mountaintop was where a new vision of Jesus and the world began. The disciples had seen Jesus do miracles and heard him teach like no one else. He had transformed the lives of the seemingly lost and abandoned. They knew he was something special. But up on the mountaintop was something different. He was suddenly with two of the greatest figures from scripture; two people who were supposed to be in the dark valley of the shadow of death; and here all of them were together and radiating with heavenly light. In other words, Jesus was much more than they could have possibly imagined because he was the Chosen Son; and there was much more going on in this world than they could have possibly imagined.

So I am going to conclude with some pictures of fairly recent moments when the world was transfigured around me. My photographic inability keeps me from capturing the true magic of the moment. But friends, just as in Jesus' day, the Spirit of God and his angels and saints and the Kingdom of Heaven are always around us. So go up the mountain with Jesus to pray. Seek and find wonderful places in our Garden State where you can simply stand in wonder and awe of who God is what God is doing. If you combine this with learning more and more about Jesus' peaceful and always-loving view of the world; and make it yours by listening to him, you will see the world around you transfigured by his presence and filled with beauty and joy.