

A Life of Celebration

Rich Nathan
March 19 & 20, 2016
The Good Life
Matthew 21:1-11

I want to show you two pairs of pictures. Tell me which picture in each pair do most people think of when they think of Christianity.

American Gothic/A Child's Birthday Party

Here's the second pair:

A pilgrim/A wedding

Now it's a very odd thing that the Christian faith has become associated with somber gatherings and joyless meetings because the founder of the Christian faith, Jesus of Nazareth, was a huge partier. Jesus' first miracle was performed at a wedding feast where he turned water, not into lemon juice making everyone's lips pucker, he didn't even turn water into grape juice as Fundamentalists like to say. For his first miracle Jesus turned water into wine.

So many of Jesus' stories involve parties. Great banquets. Wedding celebrations. In his most famous story, the story of the Prodigal Son, the father throws a huge party for his lost son when his son returns. Parties are so much a part of Jesus' life that in the gospel it's almost as if you are looking for Jesus, you might look for the biggest party in town because he's probably there. It's as if people said, "Hey, Jesus is coming through town! Fire up the grill! Tap the keg! We're going to have a party!"

Partying and celebration was part of the Jewish life and Jewish culture in which Jesus was raised. Jews were commanded three times a year to take a week to party. For example, here's what we read in Deuteronomy 16:14-15:

Deuteronomy 16:14-15

¹⁴ Be joyful at your festival—you, your sons and daughters, your male and female servants, and the Levites, the foreigners, the fatherless and the widows who live in your towns. ¹⁵ For seven days celebrate the festival to the LORD your God at the place the LORD will choose. For the LORD your God will bless you in all your harvest and in all the work of your hands, and your joy will be complete.

Over the last six weeks, we've been exploring what Jesus meant when he said in John 10:10:

John 10:10

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.

What is the Good Life that Jesus came to bring? Today I want to link together pairs of items that most folks today keep apart. Like what? Like God and happiness.

- God & Happiness
- Christian Faith & Parties
- Jesus & Joy

Everywhere you go, restaurants and bars advertise Happy Hours. You go in and look at the people sitting at the bar and many of them don't seem that happy. How many of us would be surprised if churches began to advertise their service times as "Happy Hours"? Vineyard has happy hour at 6:00pm Saturday night, 9:00 and 11:30 on Sunday – at Cooper Road. Check our website for happy hour times at our other campuses. That's way closer to the truth.

Sonja Lyubomirsky is one of the best known happiness researchers in the world. Here's what she wrote,

"I don't have a religious or spiritual bone in my body. But the studies clearly show that religious people are happier."

Her advice: if you're unhappy, she says, "by all means, practice religion!"

Today, this Palm Sunday, as I finish up our series on the Good Life, I want to talk about one essential element to living the life that God created us to live – that's celebration! I've called my message, "A Life of Celebration". Let's pray

Matthew 21:1-11

As they approached Jerusalem and came to Bethphage on the Mount of Olives, Jesus sent two disciples, 2 saying to them, "Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. 3 If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away."

4 This took place to fulfill what was spoken through the prophet:

5 "Say to Daughter Zion,

'See, your king comes to you,
gentle and riding on a donkey,
and on a colt, the foal of a donkey.'"

6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. 7 They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. 8 A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road. 9 The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted,

"Hosanna to the Son of David!"

"Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!"

"Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

10 When Jesus entered Jerusalem, the whole city was stirred and asked, "Who is this?"

11 The crowds answered, "This is Jesus, the prophet from Nazareth in Galilee."

This weekend, churches around the world are celebrating Palm Sunday, which is also known as the Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem. This Sunday is the beginning of Holy Week. A week that includes this Thursday, which is the anniversary of Jesus' Last Supper that he celebrated with his disciples. Friday is, of course, Good Friday, the celebration of Jesus' death for our sins on the cross. We will have a Good Friday service here at Cooper Road at 7:00pm on Friday evening.

Next Sunday, of course, is Easter, the celebration of Jesus' resurrection from the dead. If you are going to come to our Cooper Road campus, I would ask that you come on Saturday for an Easter service. We have two Saturday services at 3:30 and 6:00pm.

We have two Sunday services at Cooper Road at 9:00 and 11:30am.

Saturday services at 3:30 and 6:00pm

Sunday services at 9:00 and 11:30am

Palm Sunday, the Triumphal Entry of Jesus into Jerusalem, is, I think, a paradigm, a model for why it is that Christians should celebrate today.

Why should we celebrate?

Because we get to partner with God in the most awesome work ever

Here's what we read in verses 2 and 3,

Matthew 21:2-3

2 saying to them, “Go to the village ahead of you, and at once you will find a donkey tied there, with her colt by her. Untie them and bring them to me. 3 If anyone says anything to you, say that the Lord needs them, and he will send them right away.”

Here is a colt, a young donkey that Jesus borrows. What a strange thing, what a mystery. The God who created everything reveals himself in Christ, having absolutely nothing of his own. Doesn't it strike you as strange that in the gospels Jesus is constantly borrowing something? When Jesus performs his miracle of multiplying food, when he multiplies 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish, and feeds a crowd of 5,000, the gospels say that the 5 loaves and the 2 fish weren't even his. He borrowed them from a little boy. And before that, he borrowed a boat. And five days after he borrowed this donkey, his dead body would be placed in a borrowed grave.

The Creator and owner of everything, possesses nothing and borrows everything. Think with me. How does God do whatever God does in the world? How does he do it? If God is going to heal someone, or feed someone, or save someone, how does God normally work in this world?

When God wants to do something in the world, he almost always invites a human being into partnership with himself in order to fulfill his purpose in our lives or in the world. He invites us to pray so that his desires will be accomplished in the world.

John Wesley, the great founder of the Methodist Church, once said this:

God does nothing in this world except in response to the prayers of his people.

I don't think I would go quite that far, but almost. It is very clear that there is a great deal that God will not do in the world unless you and I pray, or unless you and I choose to be obedient to him. You see, it would be so much easier for God to just do what he does apart from us, without us, away from us. And yet, he chooses to work through us and together with us in this world. Friend, do you take your responsibility to pray seriously? Do you ever say to yourself, “If this good thing is going to happen I had better pray”?

The Apostle Paul says in 1 Corinthians 3.9,

1 Co 3:9

9For we are God's co-workers; you are God's field, God's building.

In an earlier talk, I said that part of living the Good Life that God created us to live is to live a life of calling. In other words, the Good Life is a life of purpose. What could be a greater purpose for your life than to partner together with Almighty God, the Creator of the Universe, in accomplishing his work in the world?

Vineyard Columbus' mission statement speaks about this partnership. We say,

Vineyard Columbus Mission Statement

Our mission is to develop a community of disciples who experience God, love one another, and partner with Christ to heal the world.

Gary Haugen, who is a Harvard-trained attorney and now heads up an organization called The International Justice Mission based in Washington, wrote an amazing book some years ago titled,

The Good News About Injustice by Gary Haugen

Let me read to you from Gary Haugen's The Good News About Injustice. He writes:

The great miracle and mystery of God is that he calls me and you to be a part of what he is doing in history. He could, of course, with no help from us proclaim the gospel of Jesus Christ with lifeless stones, feed the entire world with five loaves and two fish, heal the sick with the hem of his garment, and release all the oppressed with his angels. Instead, God has chosen us to be his hands in doing those things in the world that are important to him.

When Christ ascended into heaven, he left behind only two things for the fulfillment of all his aspirations for the world: his Spirit and his followers. With the Holy Spirit we have been commissioned to demonstrate Christ's love for all the world: to disciple the nations, to feed the hungry, to clothe the naked, to heal the broken, and even to rescue the oppressed.

You cannot go very far in your Christian life unless you grasp this mystery that by and large, God has chosen in this age to partner together with us in accomplishing his will in the world. The reason why here at Vineyard Columbus we operate two Medical Clinics, two Dental Clinics, two Food Pantries, the reason why we have a Free Legal Clinic, why we've run an Afterschool Program for about 100 kids every single day for the last 10 years, the reason why dozens of members of Vineyard Columbus mentoring kids at five Columbus area elementary schools, the reason why we came alongside over 400 women last year who are at risk for abortions and provided them with material, emotional and spiritual support so that they could choose life for their babies, the reason why we work with hundreds of immigrants in our city every week, and the reason why this weekend we started a "Transitions" ministry to provide bedroom, bathroom and kitchen supplies for people in our community who are transitioning into more permanent housing.

Homeless vets who have served our country – may have fallen on hard times - and now are transitioning into more permanent housing. Women and children who are escaping from domestic violence and need to quickly find a new place to live. Refugees who have left everything behind and need help starting a new life in America. Men and women who have paid their debt to society, they've served their time and gotten out of prison and now they're setting up an apartment.

The reason why we are creating this Transitions ministry along with everything else we do is because we believe that God has chosen to use our activities and our prayers in accomplishing those things in this world that are important to him. If you can't celebrate being used by Almighty God to bless someone else's life or being used by God the Creator to bring something of his love or justice or healing into the world, then nothing will ever cause you to celebrate. Nothing will make you excited.

What do we learn from the model of Palm Sunday? Why should we celebrate?

Because we get to have our prayers answered in the most awesome way ever

Matthew 21:6-8

6 The disciples went and did as Jesus had instructed them. 7 They brought the donkey and the colt and placed their cloaks on them for Jesus to sit on. 8 A very large crowd spread their cloaks on the road, while others cut branches from the trees and spread them on the road.

The crowds who saw Jesus hailed him as the Son of David.

Matthew 21:9

9 The crowds that went ahead of him and those that followed shouted, "Hosanna to the Son of David!" "Blessed is he who comes in the name of the Lord!" "Hosanna in the highest heaven!"

They're saying that they believe Jesus, the great conquering Messiah. They threw palm branches down in front of Christ the way their ancestors threw palm branches before Judah Maccabee, the ancient Jewish General who defeated the Greeks a few centuries earlier.

If you ask people today why do you think we give the children in children's ministry palm branches to wave? Folks will say, "Well, because it's green and it symbolizes the coming of spring." But, you see, the waving of palm branches in Jesus' day was a revolutionary act. It was like waving the Palestinian flag in Israel or waving a Kurdish flag in Turkey. Waving a palm branch was saying, "Very soon we're going to throw off our Roman oppressors!"

What do you think the people were expecting when they shouted “hosanna, save us, Lord?” They were expecting Jesus to lead a revolt against the Romans. They were expecting something like what their ancestor Judah Maccabee did two centuries before in overthrowing the Greeks, and set up a Jewish run state in the Promised Land. Save us, Jesus. Fulfill our national hopes. Restore the nation of Israel to its former glory.

And what is it that they got? A few days later, this Messianic King was arrested. He was humiliated, beaten by the Romans. This Jesus, who they called the Son of David, their last best hope, Rome decided to make example of this Jesus, and crushes him under their feet.

And in a mark of stunning irony, whereas just a few days earlier, people were taking off their robes and spreading them on the ground in front of Jesus, hailing him as King, in the early hours on Friday, Jesus is stripped of the robe that the Romans put on him when they mocked him as king. Then Jesus is further humiliated by being stripped naked and crucified.

Have you ever prayed and prayed and prayed for something and gotten exactly the opposite of what you prayed for? Have you ever thought to yourself, “What’s the point of praying when instead of my dreams being realized, what I am experiencing is my worst nightmare. Everything that I feared has come upon me.”

I think what you see in this story is the mismatch of our ways and God’s ways. The mismatch of what we ask God for and what God actually delivers. Because I see here a paradigm, a model, for much of our life as followers of Christ. We pray, “Save us, Lord. Do this particular thing – find us a spouse; heal a loved one’s condition; grant us a job; get us into this graduate school.” And the absolute opposite happens – our loved one gets sicker; we remain single; we get a rejection letter in the mail.

But you see, that’s not the end of the story. Because God always hears our prayers and he answers this Palm Sunday prayer of these Passover pilgrims, “save us” in a way that went so far beyond what the people knew or understood. God had something so much better in mind, so much greater than saving the little first century country of Judea from its particular national enemy. God intended that this Messianic King save the entire world, rescue all of humanity from what ultimately oppresses us. And what ultimately oppresses us is not some government. It is sin. And Jesus died on Good Friday to save us from the oppression of sin. What ultimately oppresses us is sin – our own sin; the sins of other people towards us.

It is because of sin that we experience alienation from God. It is because of sin that we experience broken relationships. It is because of sin that we find ourselves addicted and in bondage to powers and forces too great for us. It is because of sin that we find ourselves addicted to alcohol and drugs and broken sexual practices; addicted to food,

and work. Sin keeps us from being able to express love to each other. Sin breaks us down psychologically. Sin breaks down our families. Sin breaks down our emotional life. Sin keeps us from being able to forgive other people. Sin keeps us from being able to receive forgiveness from God.

God sent Jesus into the world to answer the prayer, “Save us.” But God answered the prayer in a way that was so much better than the people ever imagined.

You know, the Bible says in Ephesians 3:20-21 – listen to these words:

Ephesians 3:20-21

20 [God] is able to do immeasurably more than all we ask or imagine, according to his power that is at work within us, 21 to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus throughout all generations, for ever and ever! Amen.

Friend, are you in a situation now where you’ve been praying and praying and you feel like you are getting exactly the opposite of what you sought God for? I would like you to consider today that God may be wanting to grant you something that is immeasurably better than anything you could ask for or can imagine. The people who are crying out, “Save us,” couldn’t imagine that this Jesus truly was going to save them in a way that went so far beyond what they were seeking.

The Good Life that Jesus came to bring is a demanding life. The demands of those who want this Good Life that we choose to believe, even in disappointment, that God is good and that his purpose for our lives is good. Whenever you are in a situation and some of you are in this situation today, that you say, “You know, God doesn’t seem to be answering my prayers. I wonder if God cares. I wonder if God loves me. I seem to be experiencing the absolute opposite of what I prayed. All the things that I feared have come upon me.”

I’d like you to hide this truth in your hearts, God hears our prayers and he has something in store for us that is so much better than what we presently know or can imagine!

Let me widen the scope of this talk on celebration and expand it out to the broader concept of happiness or joy. Why should we celebrate? The reason why we should celebrate is because we’re happy. We’re rejoicing, but

Why should we rejoice?

Let me ask you a question. If you were asked what single word comes to your mind when you think about the Christian faith, what one word comes to your mind when you think about the Christian faith, what would that word be? Some of you might say,

“What comes to my mind is the word grace. God’s unearned, unmerited favor shown to the utterly undeserving.” That’s a great answer. You know, the word grace appears 121 times in the New Testament. Christianity is a religion of grace.

Others of you might say, “When I think about the Christian faith I think about the word love.” As it says in John 3:16

John 3:16

For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have eternal life.

The word “love” is a great answer if you were asked to come up with a single word to describe the Christian faith. After all, it appears 317 times in the New Testament. But how many of you, if you were asked for a single word to describe the Christian faith as it’s expressed in the New Testament, how many of you would come up with the word “joy”? Do you know that there are 326 occurrences of the word joy in the New Testament? The word joy is found more often in the New Testament than the word love and more often than the word grace. If there is one characteristic of the Christian faith, at least as described in the New Testament, it would be joy.

One scholar who spent his whole life studying ancient literature said this,

“The New Testament is the most buoyant, exhilarating and joyful book in the world.”

There is joy at the beginning of the gospel and joy at the end. When Jesus is born, an angel of the Lord appears to some shepherds out in a field. Here’s what we read,

Luke 2:9-11

⁹ An angel of the Lord appeared to them, and the glory of the Lord shone around them, and they were terrified. ¹⁰ But the angel said to them, “Do not be afraid. I bring you good news that will cause great joy for all the people. ¹¹ Today in the town of David a Savior has been born to you; he is the Messiah, the Lord.

And when Jesus ascends to heaven after his resurrection at the very end of the Gospel of Luke, we read this,

Luke 24:51-52

⁵¹ While he was blessing them, he left them and was taken up into heaven. ⁵² Then they worshiped him and returned to Jerusalem with great joy.

Every single New Testament writer speaks about joy. Every one. Joy is the mark of the inbreaking of God’s kingdom.

Romans 14:17

¹⁷ For the kingdom of God is not a matter of eating and drinking, but of righteousness, peace and joy in the Holy Spirit,

Joy is a mark of the indwelling of God's Spirit in our hearts.

Galatians 5:22

²² But the fruit of the Spirit is love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness,

Notice joy ranks second only after love as the mark of a Christian. So, why should we rejoice? The Bible basically talks about two types of joy. "Joy because of" and "Joy in spite of". I want to wrap up this talk by looking at those two types of joy as we conclude our study of the Good Life that Jesus came to bring.

First, there is in scripture

Joy because of

In scripture we read of joy as the natural human response to good things. Joy because of weddings. Joy at seeing an old friend or a relative. Joy over the good choices that your children make. Joy at having a child. Joy over the beauty of creation. Even joy at tasting good food, listening to music, experiencing love. Of course, in the Bible, people discover the greatest joy when they experience God.

So we read in

Psalms 16:11

You make known to me the path of life;
you will fill me with joy in your presence,
with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

And in 1 Chronicles we read this,

1 Chronicles 16:27

Splendor and majesty are before him;
strength and joy are in his dwelling place.

When a Christian thinks about all that God is and all that God has done, we rejoice. We rejoice because God is our heavenly Father who forgives our sins. We rejoice because God sent his Son into the world to save everyone who puts their trust in Christ. We rejoice because Jesus Christ not only died, but was raised again from the dead. We rejoice because Christ ascended into Heaven is now Lord of all. We rejoice because God

is not absent from this world, but he gives us the gift of his Holy Spirit who lives in the hearts of all who will receive God's Spirit. We rejoice because Jesus is coming again and he's going to renew all of creation, wiping every tear from our eyes, destroying death, healing every illness, bringing justice, bringing judgment, changing our disintegrating, decaying bodies to be like his resurrected body. We rejoice because we will one day be reunited with loved ones who have died in Christ.

The reason why early Christians rejoiced is because they believed the gospel. Gospel means good news. Have ever heard good news that didn't make you happy?

Good news, it's not cancer! Good news, your favorite team won! Good news, you got the job! Good news, you got the promotion! Good news, the person you are madly in love with loves you, and wants to spend the rest of their lives with you! Good news, after trying and trying you're finally pregnant! Best news of all, God doesn't leave this planet to fend for itself, but he entered this world in the person of Jesus Christ who lived a perfect life, showing us the way life could be lived. He died a sacrificial death for our sins, but death could not hold him. Good news, Christ is risen, death is defeated and a new world, God's perfect world, is breaking into this world!

People in the Bible rejoiced because of good things in life and the good news of the gospel. But there's a dimension of joy that goes way beyond "joy because of" and it's

Joy in spite of

For those of you who have read the New Testament, have you ever noticed that we discover joy in the most unusual places? In the book of Acts, the Apostle Paul and his friend, Silas, are arrested on trumped up charges. They are beaten and thrown in prison. Their feet are put in stocks. If anyone has ever suffered injustice at the hands of the so-called Justice system it was Paul and Silas. What do we find them doing at midnight? Not complaining about their unfair treatment, as would be absolutely warranted. Not licking their wounds or pitying themselves, as would be absolutely warranted. At midnight, they are worshipping the Lord and rejoicing.

The book of Philippians is called "The Letter of Joy". The word joy appears dozens of times in this brief letter from the Apostle Paul. But what was Paul's circumstance as he wrote about joy? His circumstance was, again, that he was in prison. Again, jailed on trumped up charges. Joy in spite of. Paul has an interesting way of describing his frequent mood.

In 2 Corinthians 6, Paul describes himself as,

Sorrowful yet always rejoicing

Have you ever felt this way? You're going through a really hard time, your heart is aching and yet despite your circumstances, your joy is not stolen. Have you ever felt that way?

J.R.R. Tolkien describes this kind of joy that can't be stolen in the Lord of the Rings. In the second book of the trilogy, *The Two Towers*, the hero, Frodo, is listening to his dear, loyal friend Sam. Sam speaks about stories that would forever be told about Frodo. Here's what we read,

Then Frodo laughed, a long clear laugh from his heart. Such a sound had not been heard in those places since Sauron came to Middle-earth. To Sam suddenly it seemed as if all the stones were listening and the tall rocks leaning over them. But Frodo did not heed them; he laughed again.

Frodo was in the sanctuary of the Enemy. He's weighed down by the dark power of the ring that he carried. As he listened to his friend, he laughed. And he rose above the power of evil. This is the joy of the Christian in spite of everything. Unquenchable joy. Joy that can't be stolen. Why? Why is joy greater than grief?

This week is Holy Week in the Christian calendar and as we move forward in the week to Thursday, we remember that it was on that night that Jesus was betrayed by one of his closest friends. He was arrested. He endured absurdly trumped up charges of the religious establishment. He endured a physical beating. He endured the betrayal by his closest friend, Peter. Indeed the scattering of all of his friends. He endured a sentence that was worse than the sentence just pronounced on a poor, young Ohio man who was sentenced to 15 years of hard labor in North Korea for stealing a political banner. Jesus' sentence was worse than that. He was sentenced by another megalomaniac, another dictator. He died an excruciating death, even death on a cross.

All of Holy Week it seems like the shadows are growing darker and darker until the moment when Jesus is hanging there on the cross and the lights in heaven completely go out. At noon that day in Jerusalem it is pitch black. And Jesus cries out, "My God, my God, why have you forsaken me?" Yet even in the dark moment Jesus' joy wasn't stolen – Hebrews says, "For the joy set before him he endured the cross". How can we rejoice when the lights go out and everything is dark? When our worlds cave in and we feel forsaken by God? How can we have joy in spite of everything? Because the cross is not the last word. Because after Good Friday comes Easter Sunday! Because the last word of God is not crucifixion but resurrection. Because the darkness on Good Friday could not hold back the light that came out of the tomb Easter Sunday so bright that no one could bear to look. Even the angels had to cover their eyes.

You know, so many folks who are considering becoming followers of Christ or obeying Christ in a difficult area of life think about things as being like this.

2 Circles – happiness and God

We think that we have to choose between our happiness and obeying God. There's no greater lie that has ever been told than that. You never choose between your happiness and obeying God. The truth looks like this,

A circle of happiness inside a much larger circle of God

Friend, your happiness and my happiness is ultimately tied up in us experiencing an intimate relationship with God. I can honestly say that 42 years ago when Christ came into my life on Good Friday, I found happiness. There were things before I met Christ that made me happy. Getting A's on tests. Hanging out with friends. Going to parties. But until Christ came into my life, I never experienced joy in spite of my circumstances. Joy not withstanding what was happening to me. Joy even in the midst of sorrow. Joy even when the darkness closes in. Joy in spite of is only available to those who are in an intimate relationship with Christ. That's the Good Life. And that's the life that God created you to experience and Jesus died to bring you.

Let's pray.

A Life of Celebration

Rich Nathan
March 19 & 20, 2016
The Good Life
Matthew 21:1-11

I. Why should we celebrate?

A. Because we get to partner with God in the most awesome work ever

B. Because we get to have our prayers answered in the most awesome way
ever

II. Why should we rejoice?

A. Joy because of

B. Joy in spite of