



## Sunday's Message June 21, 2020

Sermon Series: Lights, Cinema, Scripture!

Message: Pursuit of Happiness

First Lesson: Psalm 86:1-10; 16-17

Gospel Lesson: Matthew 10: 24-39

Preacher: Kirstie J. Engel

**We are continuing with our Lights, Cinema, Scripture Summer Netflix movie/film message series.**

And I would like to start off by giving a public thanks to Dr. Redding who preached a powerful message last week on the movie, *First they Killed my Father*.

And so this Father's Day I thought it fitting to preach in light of our scriptures the movie *Pursuit of Happiness*; a movie that is based on the life of millionaire Christopher Gardner.

And so this movie shows the struggles that Chris Gardner faces while trying to create a better life for himself and his son.

There are a lot of **themes** in this movies such as survival, determination, and never giving up on your dreams.

Now I need to be honest with you and share with you that initially when planning this movie series, I chose this movie primarily because I felt that Will Smith played a dynamic role as a father....an exceptional father in fact; who was not perfect by any means; but his love for his son was beyond evident. The character that Will played reminded me a lot of my own dad; who most of you all know is no longer alive; but my dad had a sacrificial love for both me and my brothers.

My dad was the kind of father who would fry chicken early in the morning for my class field trip in Coney Island New York; after pulling an all nighter as an exterminator; pack the chicken up and take it on a long subway ride from our home in Brooklyn, NY to Coney Island and surprise me with it...because a bologna and cheese sandwich just wouldn't do for his only daughter...

And so church initially I chose this movie because it depicted what a great father looks like;

Especially a father who happens to be Black; which I only mention because I do subscribe to the narrative that the Black man in particular in our country and perhaps even world; needs to be affirmed from my perspective;

For in a world where men with Black skin such as Ahmaud Arbery, George Floyd, Rayshard Brooks and more, are quickly dehumanized and whose criminal history is publicized in a manner to suggest that their human lives are not important; to in fact desecrate their lives before their tombstone can even be erected, is downright shameful, disrespectful and harmful to both the memory of these men, but to the remaining family; that I think it is important to share the humanity and heart of the Black man.....

Is it alright if I tell you how I really feel church?

Because let me just say this, our judicial system is designed I thought; that every citizen has a right to a trial and is considered innocent until proven guilty;

But when some people don't even make it past the parking lot;

When some people's lives are blotted out as if they never mattered;

Then this is a human rights issue that cannot be ignored;

I want to know; can these cases; if deemed a legitimate crime; at least, make it to the courtroom; where there is a meeting before a judge and a jury of their peers; with a defense attorney and a prosecutor and witnesses and all of it; instead of there being a meeting with a mortician?

So that is one of the reasons why I love the movie Pursuit of Happyness; is because you and I can see and hopefully appreciate the humanity of Chris Gardner;

You and I get to experience and witness this father's resiliency and perseverance;

And you and I also get to witness a happy ending for father and son....or do we.....

**Because this church is where this movie takes a sudden sharp turn in my theological mind, because when I then bring into our conversation our first lesson and gospel, a whole other direction presents itself....**

Where suddenly this sermon is not as easygoing and light hearted as I initially expected it would be...

Because suddenly when for instance in our first lesson Psalm 86: 4 when the psalmist says *Make your servant's life happy again....* And then in the movie, the Will Smith character questions why the constitution would even put the word **pursuit before happiness**; as if it is something one never achieves but perhaps will die trying to do so; and then finally our gospel towards the end of Matthew 10: 34 on says *Whoever loves father or mother more than me is not worthy of me; and whoever loves son or daughter more than me is not worthy of me. 38 and whoever does not take up the cross and follow me is not worthy of me. 39 Those who find their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.*; church taking all of this in ; have begun to see a more urgent charge rising from our scriptures and movie— and **that is a charge for us all to consider what we might be pursuing and why we are doing so?**

So to reflect on the Will Smith character for some answers to these questions; all he wanted was to be happy;

All he wanted was his son to be happy...

In fact there was one point in the movie where Will Smith asked his son...are you happy?

In our first lesson, the psalmist says...Lord make your servant happy again.....

Then our gospel tells us essentially (as I paraphrase it) to not get too comfortable with this idea of placing our mother and our father before God's mission; and ironically from my perspective what makes me most happy is my family....

So I find myself wrestling with our gospel this morning, because it seems to be the antithesis of what perhaps what you and I might find our happiness in.

For Chris Gardner; having a roof over him and his son's head and having their basic needs met, was the American dream; that would make him and his son happy.

For our psalmist, happiness was tied to safety and protection.

And yet, our gospel I believe would suggest that this is what life is not about at all.

In fact the gospel suggests that *Those who find their lives will lose them, and those who lose their lives because of me (Christ) will find them.*

**So the question rises again, what are you pursuing; what am I pursuing?**

Furthermore, are you happy, am I happy?

So this is the tension I leave with us all to wrestle in.

And I will be vulnerable with you all for a moment as I put myself out here and answer the question for the world right now in hopes that the Word will come alive for all of us...am I happy?

And would answer honestly.....no.

I gave up being happy a long time ago.....

In fact, I will be honest with you...for me being happy is overrated....it is underwhelming and typically short lived.

In fact, I gave up being happy a long time ago and traded it in instead for..... joy.

Because when looking church at the difference between being happy and having joy; when I am done expounding on the two; perhaps I just might convert you as well into trading in happiness in exchange for joy....

Because I stopped by to say that happiness is a short lived emotion.....

Sheryl Crow famously wrote in a song, "If it makes you happy, it can't be that bad. If it makes you happy, then why the hell (heck) are you so sad?"

So Crow apparently could discern that being happy isn't always what is best for us.

That is because happiness is an emotion in which we "experience feelings ranging from contentment and satisfaction to bliss and intense pleasure," and this often stems from specific circumstances...

So for example, when my bank account is full, I am happy...true story;

But the minute it dwindles....I am not as happy.....

Because the truth of the matter (and this is where I did not anticipate this sermon turning to), but I am a struggling, recovering consumerist;

In the book *The Future of Preaching* by Geoffrey Stevenson, he said; "We've become a nation measuring out our lives in shopping bags and nursing our psychic ills through retail therapy."

And so church let me tell you, there was a time where no one could tell me that retail therapy wasn't effective.

I subscribed to retail therapy often;

If I was bored, I shopped...

If I was upset, I shopped....

If I was happy, I shopped...

If I was sad, I shopped.....

And so why I thought that retail therapy actually worked, was because for the moment, from my perspective.... it did work.....or so I thought....

Because I like new things; new clothes; new fascinators....

But when the bags were empty;

And the novelty of those new items wore off;

And a day or two would pass;

I found my spirit restless all over again....and my happiness was gone.....

And that is when I realized, that I needed to make some changes in my life... because happiness wasn't cutting it for me...

And so I prayed to God, to help me with my issue of my fleeting happiness and turning to retail therapy to help me and God's answer to me was planting a seed within my mind, to begin to pursue joy....

And you see church in reflecting on the definition of joy; joy "is a stronger, less common feeling than happiness."

And in reflecting on my personal experiences, I realized that I tend to experience joy, when I achieve selflessness to the point of personal sacrifice.

I tend to feel joy when I am spiritually connected to God and community.

I tend to experience joy when I am living out my missional call of loving God and loving our neighbor.

So for me joy began to take up residency within my heart and mind once I started to live out Jesus mission;

## **And so what is Jesus mission?**

I believe we find the mission embedded in our gospel this morning in verse 38 where it says *Those who don't pick up their crosses and follow me aren't worthy of me.*

## **The mission for you and I is to pursue and carry the cross....**

And so what does this mean?

Well to give us all a vivid perspective of what the pursuit and carrying of a cross looks like and feels like; the story of Jesus tells us that the Roman soldiers placed a heavy cross on Jesus back to carry to the place of Golgotha; where Jesus would be crucified;

Now for some theologically, the cross represents all of our sins of the world;

For others, the cross represents all of our burdens;

In researching what the actual dimensions of the cross that Jesus would have carried ; what was interesting off the bat to me, was that some scholars does not identify the object that Jesus carried as being a cross; instead, the cross was referred to some as the torture stake.

So the torture stake that Jesus would have carried during that time, was approximately the size of about 11 feet or 3.5 meters long and six inches wide.

It would have had an estimated diameter of 15 centimeters.

It was an estimated **weight** of around 100 pounds or over 45 kilos.

## **So placing this description back into our conversation; how then can carrying such a weight produce joy?**

Well let me just say that for me the cross is extremely meaningful to me.

I am a preacher that holds a very high Christology in that Jesus is just as much divine as he was human.

I am a preacher that has a very high cross theology.

And what that means to me is that I am not comfortable with replacing the language of the cross with being a torture stake; although Christ was no doubt tortured on the cross;

And this is because the cross for me is not just a mere object that Jesus was tortured on or a symbolism of his torture;

## **But on the contrary, the cross for me is a symbolism of Jesus strength....**

Because I don't know about you church, but I am inspired and transformed by this idea that Christ carried this enormous load; when in all honesty he didn't have to....

Christ carried this unbearable weight and it did not overtake him.....

Barbara Brown Taylor described theses mission beautifully. She said : He (Jesus) has always led us from within our midst, joining us in the water, in the mud, in the skin to show us how it is done. From dust to dust and ashes to ashes, from the cradle through the waters of baptism to the grave, he knows what we are up against and has showed us how to live so life never ends: choosing whatever will bring us closer together, and above all choosing the things of earth—doves, water, mud, skin, love—to carry out the purposes of heaven.”

So church that is what Christ did...he carried out the purposes of heaven when he carried the cross....

Christ carried 100 pounds of grief,

He carried 100 pounds of injustice

He carried 100 pounds of marginalization

He carried 100 pounds of oppression,

Christ carried 100 pounds of every form of hatred, evil, bias, racism, sexism and act of violence one can imagine and he conquered it;

Letting me know that with God's help, I can carry my own cross and pursue each challenge with a measure of hope and optimism; trusting that Christ working within me will help me to conquer it;

Letting us all know that with Christ working through all of us; our overall pursuit for justice, equity and freedom for all persons will yield nothing but a victory. And this is when joy is genuinely produced from my perspective;  
When we begin to see the work of the cross play out;  
When we begin to see people receive some form of justice for their woes;  
When we begin to break down and abolish laws that oppress and marginalize;  
When we begin to see laws such as DACA; Deferred Action for Childhood Arrivals; remain in place...  
When we begin to see people think before they speak; apologize for their wrongdoing and bias and remove images throughout our country that have only exacerbated the oppression that looms over them;  
When we begin to ask questions and even challenge policies and laws that criminalizes and dehumanizes the sacred worth of a human being and then be blessed to witness those systemic forces begin to buckle right before our very eyes;  
This is the work of the cross at its finest...this is how you and I carry out the purposes of heaven church....  
It is the efforts of compassionate and empathetic people all around the globe; trading in their happiness in exchange for joy; choosing to pick up metaphorical crosses everyday so that they can pursue equity, justice and love for all; thereby producing a joy within; that cannot even be adequately described;  
Because once we can see the impact of our combined efforts;  
It's satisfying....  
It's transformative....  
Making the lyrics; this joy that I have, the world didn't give it to me and the world can't take it away.....come alive....  
Because this is the joy that allows us to wake up in the morning with a measure of hope....  
This is the joy that allows people to keep carrying their cross with a measure of determination.  
This is the joy that never wanes but only gets stronger within us;  
Until the concept of kingdom on Earth and Kingdom in heaven are evident to all; until this concept is truly achievable for all; the charge for all of us is to carry the cross and keep up our pursuit for equity for all;  
Let the Church Say Amen!

Sincerely,

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