

The Pursuit of Happiness
Psalm 91: 1-16; Luke 4: 1-13
February 17, 2013 Sermon (First Sunday in Lent)
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I Introduction

Last week, I was listening to NPR, and there's a little segment in the morning called *Planet Money*, that deals with a lot of financial stuff, and they did a segment that started off with these words. "When people ask how a country is doing, the first thing you often hear about is the state of the economy. An important measurement is the GDP, gross domestic product, but some countries are interested in measuring something else: happiness. Canada, France, and Britain have recently added happiness to their official national statistics. The nation of Bhutan has been gauging happiness for decades. And this year, the United States is thinking of joining this club."

I had been struck over the course of the last several months at hearing a lot of conversation about happiness and what it means to be happy. So when Drema McAllister-Wilson and Betty Rogers were putting together our Lenten contemplative series, and titling it *Cultivating Happiness*, I thought it might be a good opportunity for us to use our Lenten lectionary texts to explore this idea a little bit more thoroughly.

Now, I will also say that as I have floated this idea about talking about happiness during Lent, the response of you all in the congregation has been one of almost universal skepticism, which I'm used to to a certain degree. But the response I often get is, "Why are we talking about happiness during Lent? Isn't Lent supposed to be, kind of, a serious season? The season in which we dig into our spiritual life a little bit more

deeply, and isn't happiness, sort of, a frivolous topic to be taken up during this serious time of our year?"

II. The Importance of Happiness

And I want to argue that happiness is a profoundly appropriate subject for Lent precisely because Lent is the time of digging in and focusing on our spiritual core. And that is precisely the place where we discover happiness, true happiness. It is because that is who God has called us to be, and it is only when we live out of that place that we experience the happiness that God desires for us. Our problem is that we've often misdefined happiness. We've usually referred to it as experiencing pleasure, and we have, therefore, started looking for happiness in a lot of the wrong places.

Happiness has been a central theme of philosophers and theologians throughout the years. Aristotle, who was not a particularly frivolous guy by nature, in his *Nicomachean Ethics* starts off talking about the fact that the purpose of life is to experience happiness. *Eudaimonia* is a Greek word that means to flourish and to live well, and Aristotle pointed out that happiness is the only thing in our life that we do that is not geared towards something else. Everything else we do is to get some place, except for happiness because that's the place we want to get, right?

The French philosopher, Pascal, echoed that in saying, all people seek happiness. That is without exception. Whatever different means they employ, they all tend towards this end. It is the cause of some going to war and others avoiding war attendant with different views. The will never takes the least step but towards this object.

And our founding fathers, of course, were very clear that the pursuit of happiness was one of our inalienable rights. It was at the core of who we are as people.

It has also been a really central idea in Christian tradition, our Biblical witness is filled with admonitions about what it means to be really happy and what it takes to become truly happy. Ecclesiastes says, "I know that there is nothing better for people than to be happy and to do good while they live;" Proverbs, "Happy are those who find wisdom and who get understanding."

Interestingly, the Greek word that's used in the New Testament for happiness, *Eulogeo*, is the same word that gets used for blessing. So, you'll notice, depending on what translation you read, when Jesus is, for example, teaching us The Beatitudes, he says, "Blessed are the poor in spirit," or you'll see some translations read that as, "Happy are the poor in spirit." So, what you have right away is Jesus trying to help us get out of the usual way we have of understanding happiness and get to a deeper level.

John Wesley, who also was not a particularly frivolous man, preached -- yes -- preached very explicitly in one of his sermons, "God made all things to be happy, and you are made to be happy in God."

III. Looking for Happiness in All the Wrong Places – Jesus in the Desert

So, if God has made us to be happy in relationship with God's self, Lent then becomes the time of year when we start to strip away those things that keep us from getting to that place, when we start stripping away the false understandings we have of what happiness is and start to go to a deeper level. We see this very powerfully in this

wonderful gospel lesson that is the same story that starts off every Lent, Jesus' 40 days in the wilderness and temptation by the devil.

Jesus has been fasting for 40 days, so he's really hungry. And Satan comes to him and says, "You know, you can eat if you want. All you've got to do is make these stones into bread, and I know you've got the juice to do that." And Jesus reminds Satan and us that the things we perceive we need are not always the things we need. That what we really need is to be grounded in God. This is a very critical temptation for us, because what Satan is offering is acknowledging the fact that we all hunger, we sometimes physically hunger, we all the time spiritually hunger, and we seek to fill that with the things that we get, whether that's food or stuff or anything else. We consume in the hopes that we can fill ourselves and become satisfied and happy. And Jesus reminds us that we can't become happy by consuming stuff, as consumers. That the hole that we're trying to fill is only filled through our relationship with God, and that anything else besides that is going to be very, very transitory, that our true being, our true fulfilledness comes from our walk with God.

So, Satan then takes Jesus to a high mountain, shows him all the kingdoms of the earth and says, "You can have power over all of these." And interestingly, I just want you to note, Jesus doesn't dispute the idea that Satan has the authority to grant political power. I'm just saying. I'm not preaching on that. I'm just offering that as a -- it's a thought, not a sermon. It's part of a sermon.

How often do we find ourselves saying, "I would be really happy if only I had the power to do X;" "I would be truly happy if my children would do what I want them to do?" I said this last service when my children were here. How often do we say, "I would be

really happy if I had the authority in my job to do this,” or “If I had gotten that promotion in my job which would give me the authority to really change the way this place works?” How often do we tell ourselves, “I would be happy if I had the power to live in this kind of way?” Or conversely, “I am unhappy because I’ve got this terrible boss who is exerting his or her power over me,” or maybe, “I lost my job, and so all of the identity that I have wrapped up in the work that I do is now gone?” And how often does that employment crisis then become a personal crisis?

Clergy, who should in theory know better, are terrible at this. All of our egos are wrapped up in our job as pastors, and the number of clergy who die within the first year of their retirement is staggering because, if I’m not a preacher, who am I? Because we get all of who we are wrapped up in this thing that we do, and Jesus, of course, reminds us that that’s not who we are. Who we are is a sacred child of God and our only worth and our only value comes through that relationship with God.

So, Satan takes Jesus to the pinnacle of the temple and says, “Throw yourself off because God is going to intervene and make sure not a bad thing happens to you.” How often do we find ourselves in place in which we say, “if only God would take my sickness away, if only God would make sure that my mother who’s got cancer gets healed, if only God would intercede and take away the suffering that I’m experiencing?”

We long for God to make our lives painless and easy. And Jesus reminds us that that’s not the God who we worship. We don’t worship a God who comes in to sweep away all of the suffering that we experience or that the world experiences. We worship a God who chooses to suffer those same trials with us, so that regardless of what suffering or trials we experience personally or the world experiences in its

brokenness, God is present in all of that. And if our happiness is because of our relationship with God, none of that stuff can separate us from the love of God and Jesus Christ, Paul tells us.

IV. The Shelter of the Most High

That, of course, is the heart of this wonderful Psalm 91 that we read responsively today and is our lectionary Psalm for this first Sunday in Lent -- it's all about the fact that the world has all kinds of crazy stuff going on around us, but that in the midst of that, we can rest secure and happy because of who God is and God's promise to us to be with us through all of that.

There's a wonderful contemporary teacher on meditation who's actually going to be spending some time with us in March by the name of Sharon Salzberg. Sharon writes, "Conventional happiness -- the consolation of momentary distractions -- is not only transitory, it can actually be isolating, shot through with an undercurrent of fear. Because even when things are going well, we have the nagging feeling -- in the midst of our pleasure -- that our well-being is fragile, unstable, in need of protection."

Psalm 91 is a joyous affirmation that in the midst of the uncertainty and the instability, we stand on the rock and that nothing can take that away from us. This Psalm, as you read, is filled with this rich imagery of violence and persecution, and again, the affirmation that we stand secure in the midst of that.

There's an interesting phrase in verse six where the psalmist talks about the destruction that wastes at noon day which in ancient monastic tradition, was something that was called *acedia*. It's this idea of a sense of hopelessness that sometimes takes

over us that nothing that we do is really going to ultimately make a difference. Its clinical cousin is depression, but acedia is the sense that all of us get at various points that whatever is before us is just not worth the fight. And in the face of that, the psalmist promises that our groundedness in God is deeper and more profound than all of those things, and that when we rest there, we can rest secure and happy.

V. Conclusion

Happiness is a notorious thing to measure and even to define, and I think part of the skepticism that you all have reflected back to me about happiness as a Lenten theme is, how do we get our hands around this idea, its amorphousness and its sense of being profoundly subjective?

The NPR story I mentioned at the beginning of the sermon reported on a study that a university had done in asking random people on the street whether or not they were happy and recording their responses. But they added an extra piece for some of the respondents in which they planted a nickel on the ground. If the people found the nickel and picked it up, they asked them how happy they felt. And people who picked up a nickel apparently are a great deal happier than the people who don't, on average.

It's an interesting idea but I want to suggest not that far off, because most of us spend our lives with a lot of unhappiness, a lot of dissatisfaction with the way our lives have unfolded. And I want to suggest delicately that if our happiness is depending on whether or not we find that nickel, we're going to be living with a lot of dissatisfaction and unhappiness in our lives. I want to suggest that this Lent may be a time for us to dig a little bit deeper to find what it is that gives us happiness.

In the video that Drema McAllister-Wilson did, which you'll find on our website for our contemplative Lenten series that starts tonight, she shared a wonderful quote from Shakespeare's play, *Measure for Measure*, that reads, "Go to your bosom; Knock there, and ask your heart what it doth know."

I think that's a powerful image for what a Lenten journey is about. Go to your heart and knock there and find out what it is that you know. Lent offers us a time when we can re-center and find out what our heart doth know, and in that place, discover happiness.

Amen.

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