

Happy Together
Genesis 15: 1-12, 17-18; Philippians 3: 17-4:1
February 24, 2013 (Second Sunday in Lent)
Rev. Dr. Charles Parker

I Introduction

I have this great office at the church where the window looks out on the parking lot so I get to monitor who comes in and out of my church. You should probably be aware of this because some of you are doing things in the parking lot you shouldn't be! But last Thursday, I got a chance to sit and kind of watch all of the wonderful members of our church who were going on this new adult Appalachian service project trip, collecting all of the construction equipment and loading up the vans and heading out for the weekend. Because everybody was so excited about this trip and this new ministry opportunity, it struck me very forcefully that there was just great energy and great enthusiasm. I found it interesting because here was this group of really gifted and capable and busy people who were excited about loading construction equipment on a completely frigid day to go out and work on the house of somebody that they didn't even know. And it wasn't as though these were folks who had too much time on their hands. In fact, I suspect quite a number of them had construction projects at home that they could've been working on. But they were excited about the opportunity to reach out in service to somebody in our broader community.

That joy, of course, is at the heart of all of the motivation behind the volunteer work that is part of our ministry and mission at Metropolitan. It's a wondrous thing to watch.

But it got me thinking about this week's scripture lessons, because we are looking at our lectionary texts this Lent through the eyes of our call to happiness. Now, that's an unexpected topic for Lent, as many of you have pointed out, because Lent is traditionally a time when we re-center ourselves and re-focus on our call to be in God, and when we start to strip away the things that we put between ourselves and God. But, I want to argue that it is exactly because that's what our Lenten journey is about, that it is so fitting to talk about happiness. Because it is when we strip away the needless stuff and really get centered and focused on our life with God that we discover what true happiness is about. So, part of this journey is redefining, maybe, how we think of happiness and where we expect happiness to come from.

We're also pairing that with this wonderful opportunity to do a Lenten contemplative service in the evening where we really get to practice in a very compelling way how we center ourselves in God. A chance to go a little bit deeper and hear God's voice.

II. Mistake about Happiness

Now, we kicked off our series last week by remembering Aristotle's words in the Nichomachean Ethics that happiness is the meaning and purpose of life. It is the whole aim and end of human existence. Aristotle teaches us that happiness is the one thing in our life that we seek that is not aimed at getting to someplace else. Happiness is in and of itself the end of our life.

Now, we also talked last week about the fact that often we seek happiness in some fairly unproductive and sometimes destructive ways. And we reflected on the

lectionary text that is always the first passage that kicks off Lent, which is the story of Jesus' time in the wilderness and His temptation by the devil. We also talked about the fact that far too often, as the devil tempted Jesus, we seek happiness through the things that we consume, and that we seek happiness through expressing and seeking our own power and desire to control -- that's the second temptation -- and that we seek happiness by trying to avoid the pain and suffering that happens in life. And over and over again in that very powerful story, we hear Jesus reminding us as He speaks to the devil that all of those ways of seeking happiness are illusory, and that the true happiness for which we are created is to be found only in God.

III. At Al Gore's speech after receiving the Nobel Prize, he talked about an old African proverb that says, "If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go together."

This week, we're going to look at the paradox that often we are the happiest when we are seeking the happiness of someone else. When Al Gore was awarded the Nobel Peace Prize a few years ago, in his acceptance speech, he referenced an old African proverb that says, "If you want to get some place fast, go yourself; if you want to go far, go together."

That's a helpful word for us, I think, because we live in a society which is all about getting some place fast. We want it all right now, whether we're learning a new subject or we're looking at the return on our investments, we want it right now. And what that fosters, I think, is a societal comfort with doing things on our own, to be alone as we try to get to where we're going.

The proverb that Mr. Gore quoted echoes, however, a much older wisdom that is at the root of our scriptural witness, which is that our journey is, in truth, always with other people and our journey to God is one that we take together.

Today's lectionary readings very much echo that and the Genesis passage in particular is a somewhat challenging one because the imagery is so foreign and so visceral. It's the second time that God has promised Abraham that he has been called not simply to a journey with God Himself, but he has been called to give birth to a community, a community that will be a blessing to the nations around it.

Abraham is old, and it's been a little while since God had made this promise to him, it was back in chapter 12, and now we come to chapter 15, and God says again to Abraham, "You can rest in Me and trust Me, and I will protect you." And Abraham says, "That's great to hear, but you had made a promise to me three chapters ago, and we haven't seen a lot of activity on that front. You promised me a family. A family that would become a nation that would transform the world, and I'm still childless. My estate is going to my servant, Eliezer, unless something changes." And God says, "No, the promise still holds, and I am committing Myself utterly to it."

God says that through this odd ceremony that we have recounted in this chapter, but it's one that while we don't get the imagery, Abraham would have very profoundly. In the ancient near east, the way that you make a covenant with someone is that you sacrificed an animal or several animals, you split the animal in half. Then the parties of the covenant walked between the split halves of the animals and said essentially, "If I break this covenant, may this happen to me." It's a very visceral image.

In fact, in Hebrew, the word for making a covenant is actually not to write a covenant or to make a covenant -- it's to cut a covenant. That's the Hebrew phrase that captures this picture of how one makes a covenant.

So, God invites Abraham to sacrifice his animals, split them in half, and then, in a really interesting turnabout, God walks between the animals as a solemn promise, promising God's own life for the accomplishment of the covenant that he is engaged in with Abraham. So, as you heard in the story, Abraham actually falls asleep and then wakes up in deep darkness and sees the torch which is symbolic of God's presence walking between these cut animals, as God's solemn vow that the community will come to be.

For us as Christians, this should resonate very deeply with the promise of God in the incarnation to become vulnerable, even to the point of death, to give birth to the community that will transform the world.

Throughout history, teachers as varied as John Wesley and the Dalai Lama have taught us that pursuing our own individual happiness is a vain enterprise. We are at our core built for community, built for relationship with one another. My happiness is inextricably bound up with your happiness, so that I can't seek my own happiness and achieve it without seeking your happiness as well. And we both need to seek the happiness as a community as we become aware that as I sometimes even sacrifice myself for your happiness, my happiness emerges.

This scripture passage echoes in a very compelling way, again, that the paradoxical message that sometimes engaging in a sacrifice of myself is the road to my fulfillment and my happiness.

This is, of course, also at the root of this wonderful letter to the Philippians that Paul has written. Philippi was a Roman colony that was very heavily populated by retired military from the Roman Empire. It was Asbury Village for retired soldiers, right?! Sort of. Paul draws on this military imagery in helping the church at Philippi understand what our life together is about. He uses terms that the military folks would have resonated with very powerfully. As he's writing this letter, he talks about citizenship; citizenship in the Roman Empire came when you served in the army. You could inherit it, but for most people, the only route into citizenship in the Roman Empire was through service in the army. So, he talks about citizenship, defending against enemies. He talks about *Savior* which is again a word that was used in Roman Celtic worship to refer to the divine emperor as savior, making all things subject standing firm. These are all heavily loaded military phrases, because he wants the church of Philippi to understand those things that made you an unbeatable fighting force are the same gifts that you bring now to life in community here. They've just got a different focus to them.

You all have seen pictures or maybe seen in movies the way the Roman legions work. It's essentially a body of thousands of men operating as a single unit. Paul says that's a powerful image for the body of Christ because we all need each other in this journey. We're all part of the team, and the kind of intense camaraderie and love and teamwork that makes a legion work are what's going to make us work as a family of God. But Caesar is no longer our savior, and our citizenship is no longer with Rome. Jesus is the savior and our citizenship is in the kingdom that Jesus has initiated. So that he says, if you are about pursuing your own happiness by seeking your own needs -- he refers to this in the passage as "the god of your belly," again, with that image of

consumption as the danger -- if that's your way of achieving happiness, you're missing the point. What you need to hearken back to is what it was like when you were in the service, that kind of complete dedication and complete faithfulness to the community in which you serve. That is what we are about now and that's what gets us to heaven.

IV. Seeking the Happiness of Others

Benedictine Sister Joan Chittister is a fairly prolific author and has written a book that's entitled *Happiness*, and she says, "Happiness is not simply a private or personal gift. Happiness is a social responsibility."

In his groundbreaking work, *Man's Search for Meaning*, psychiatrist and holocaust survivor, Viktor Frankl, wrote, "Happiness cannot be pursued. It must ensue, and it only does so as the unintended side effect of one's personal dedication to a cause greater than oneself, or as the by-product of one's surrender to a person other than one's self."

Dr. Martin Luther King also shares this idea, writing, "Those who are not looking for happiness are the most likely to find it, because those who are searching forget that the surest way to be happy is to seek happiness for others."

We live in a culture that encourages us to seek our own happiness, and sometimes, even argues that once I have achieved my happiness, then I can start working on yours. We are part of an economic system in which advertisers seek to cause us to be discontented in order to sell us the thing that will make us contented, right? Our message today is that is exactly the opposite way that happiness really happens. You can get some temporary happiness that way. You can get some fleeting

pleasure or comfort as you seek your own happiness, as you buy the thing that will make you fulfilled. But it's very, very transitory and very, very easily disrupted.

Our scriptures call us to a much more deeply rooted understanding of what happiness is about. It's a happiness that we can claim and own despite living in a world that is sometimes chaotic and sometimes painful and often filled with suffering, because our rootedness is deeper than that. Where are you seeking the happiness of the people around you? Where are you able to put aside your immediate need in order to serve someone else so that their life can be happy and joyful?

Our message today is that that is the place where you will find your happiness start to come to bloom and you don't have to worry about it at all.

V. Conclusion

Lent is a time of going deep. It's a time of setting aside the things that we think will satisfy us in order to focus on the thing, the only thing, which will satisfy us. All of the disciplines of Lent are aimed at this one cause. This is what fasting is about. This is what sacrifice is about. It's about the paradox that when we can put aside the things that we think we need, when we can put aside our striving after our own fulfillment and seek the fulfillment of the community in which we reside and seek the happiness of the people around us, that's when we actually get fulfilled.

Our Appalachian Service Project team will return this afternoon from their trip. I trust that they will have had a rich experience -- I haven't heard from any of them. But I trust that they will come back having initiated what I hope will be a new and wonderful opportunity for ministry in our church as we move forward. I know also that they will

return having been a profound blessing to somebody that none of us knows who is in desperate need and whose life they helped to transform. But I also trust that they will come back from that trip happier than when they left.

Amen.