

The Practice of Happiness
Joshua 5: 9-12; Luke 15: 1-3, 11b-32
March 10, 2013 (Fourth Sunday in Lent)
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I Introduction

In 1899, Claude Monet was in London. He had fled there to escape the Franco-Prussian War. He started a series of paintings that were of the British Houses of Parliament, and there are 19 of these. They are all exactly the same size looking at exactly the same scene from exactly the same perspective, yet all of them are wonderfully different.

Part of the danger of a lectionary passage like the one that we just heard today is that we've heard it so often, and it's so powerful and we've heard so many good sermons around it that as soon as we hear those words, "There was a man with two sons," it's easy to kind of move into that sort of glazed place that we go where we think we've heard it all before. One of the gifts of encountering scripture passages over and over again over the years is the opportunity to bring that Claude Monet eye to this, so we can see the same story through some different lenses and different hues. The lens that we're bringing to the story this Lent is this focus that we have been having on cultivating happiness. For those of you who haven't been with us during Lent so far, that's an unusual topic for Lent because Lent is typically the time where we center ourselves and dig deep and get into the hard stuff of our faith, the spiritual disciplines that carry us forward.

But the interesting thing about both of these scripture lessons this morning is that they both speak to us about happiness as a spiritual discipline. We have been focusing

over the last several weeks on the idea that, in John Wesley's words, we have been created to be happy in God. That is where we find our fulfillment and come to rest in who God has created us to be. We also talked about all of the ways that we try to seek happiness that are counterproductive, trying to seek happiness through the things that we acquire and consume, seeking happiness through finding and expressing power, seeking happiness by avoiding pain and suffering both ours and the people around us.

II. Moving to Discipline

Last week, we talked about this core truth of our faith that God has given us all that we need to be happy, and given it to us as a free gift of grace. Remember we reflected on those beautiful passages from Isaiah where the prophet says, "Come all of you who are hungry and thirsty and get food and wine and milk at no cost." All of these are God's free gift. This image that we have from the Book of Joshua and in the Book of Exodus about manna, the manna in the wilderness, is a powerful image of the graciousness of God, who in the place where the Israelites were frightened and uncertain as they travel through the desert, gives them the manna and quail that will sustain them every single day.

The Israelites learned what grace was about in the desert. They learned that God was a trustworthy God, that they could rely on God's providence. They also learned that they couldn't hoard grace. Do you remember some of those stories about manna and quail where they tried to scoop up a little bit extra just in case, right? And it always rotted by the next day. There is something about grace that doesn't allow hoarding. But then we get to this interesting junction in the story in which the Israelites

have entered the Promised Land, and they're celebrating their first Passover in the land that God had given them.

You've got this very brief line in our lectionary text that says, "On that day the manna ceased and the people begin to eat of the fruit of the land." It's a very wonderful description of the process of spiritual maturation in which we begin as simple recipients of the gifts that God gives us. But then we start to participate with God. We received the invitation to be co-creators with God. The story is not a story about grace stopping and work starting, right? It's about sublimating the grace in a way that allows us to deepen our spiritual walk. It is not dissimilar from the way that we work with our children, right? When they were very young, we give them what they need and often what they want. But as they get older, we start to teach them how they can participate in that process. We invite them to save some of their money. We invite them to engage in the work of the household all of which deepens who they become as children. We see this same process in the story from Joshua.

That process of moving from gift into being co-creators provides some powerful insight into the way we understand and relate to happiness because happiness often comes to us as a gift, as manna from heaven. We are graced with these wonderful moments in which it becomes clear that all is right with the world. When we see a breathtaking sunset or hold a newborn child or revel in the pleasure of family time, we have these gifted moments in which we understand the happiness that God has created us for. But then our scriptures call us to take that gift and start to figure out how we deepen it. At some point, we move from happiness being a kind of a random bit of grace and we start to understand that ultimately it is actually a discipline that God invites

us to engage in. We need to decide that we have a responsibility for our own happiness and, in fact, the happiness of the community.

We talked about the role of the community a couple of weeks ago and how, when I seek just my own happiness, I'm ultimately bound to fail. But when I seek happiness with all of you in community and when I seek your happiness, my happiness begins to emerge. I used a quote from a wonderful Benedictine sister named Joan Chittister that a number of you commented on after the sermon. What I didn't tell you then was I only gave you a piece of the quote. I'm going to give you the rest of it today because it pertains to this central idea of happiness as a discipline. She writes, and this is the quote I gave you a couple of weeks ago, "Happiness is not simply a private and personal gift. Happiness is a social responsibility." Then she continues with these words, "My happiness or lack of it affects the people around me as surely as it affects me. When I am depressed, when my dark mood oozes out into the world around me, I poison the environment for everyone else. Life is not a matter only of attending to my own comfort and good feeling. Happiness has something to do with what I bring into every dimension of my life. My unhappiness makes for an unhappy family - mine. My workplace suffers when my productivity is clouded by anger and depression. My awareness of the needs of the rest of the world goes to nothing while I struggle with my own woundedness and do little or nothing to attend to anyone else's. Happiness is a social imperative".

III. The Non-Prodigal Son

Our scripture lessons today call us to reflect on happiness as a discipline, how we bring an awareness of this call to be happy into all of our social engagements. There is a very powerful piece of this that is part of our story about the prodigal son this morning. I am not crazy about calling this, frankly, the story of The Prodigal Son because you all know that this title, the story The Prodigal Son, is not in the Bible, right? That's just a heading some editors put in the Bible, so we could find it quickly. But it's a little bit deceptive because what it does is make the whole story about the first son. I think it might be better if we call this The Parable of the Two Sons because both sons have something important to teach us. Of course, the story of the first son is the story that we talked about last week. On some level it is the more fundamental story, which is about the overwhelming unending graciousness of God.

It's a story of a very immature son who deeply offends his father and dismisses the traditions of his broader community, grabs hold of his inheritance, squanders it and literally ends up living among the pigs, which is a compelling image for us. It was a very disturbing image for Jesus' hearers because, of course, pigs in Jewish culture are an abomination, so to live with the pigs is about as low as it gets for a person. Then in this wonderful phrase of Luke's, the son came to himself. In other words, he realized who he was and makes a decision to humble himself and return to his father. His father welcomes him with open arms and kills the fattened calf - a wonderful and powerful message of God's unstoppable grace and unceasing longing for us.

But then story transitions to the second son. While on some level you can argue it's a less bedrock theological doctrine than the doctrine of grace, on some level I would argue that the second son actually speaks to most of us better than the first son

because frankly we're all sitting here in church and the first son is out partying, right? Amen. We have first son moments, but by and large we're the second son, right? We're the folks that have been toiling in the fields. We've been doing what God calls us to do. Then this no good so and so comes home and the father kills the fattened calf and all of us are going, "Really? Did I not deserve something better than that?" Of course, there is the subtheme there which is, wow, I could have been out doing that too, right?

And so he is outside and the father comes to him, and the son expresses all of these frustrations. In my head, the father looks at him rather quizzically as if to say, "wow, I thought you had got this; apparently, you haven't so let me spell it out for you." He tells the second son these two pieces that reshaped the whole dialogue. He says, "You are always with me." Or to rephrase that, "I am always with you and everything I have is yours." So the father says, "I don't even understand your complaint. If you wanted a goat to kill and have a party with your friends, it's your goat, kill it and have a party. I am always with you and everything I have is yours." You see, what he wants the son to understand is everything you need to be happy you have. I've given it all to you. Now it's your decision about whether or not you want to claim that happiness.

Where are the places in our life that we are invited to shape the world around us through nothing more than our attitude, through nothing more than channeling the gracious love that God has offered us and offers us every day. Our call here is to make happiness, our happiness and consequently the happiness of the world around us, a discipline. It is a call that God has laid on us. So that Lent, on some level, is about stripping away all of our behaviors that keep us from being happy. It's time for us to

strip away all of the stuff that we surround ourselves with, all of the ambient noise of our life that keeps us from centering on who God is for us and where God is for us and hearing God's voice speak to us. Lent is an invitation to let all of that stuff go, an invitation to go to that place inside of us where God is speaking and to take joy in God's presence there with us to experience the fullness of life that God is always offering us.

IV. Conclusion

An interesting piece of this parable is that Jesus never finishes the story. I don't know if you noticed that. But Jesus never says whether the second son went in to the party or not. Did he go in? Did he set aside his pride, his woundedness and go in and celebrate, to feast at the fattened calf and drink the wine and celebrate with his brother who had been reclaimed? Or did he stay out in the darkness nursing his hurt feelings and bitterness? I think that Jesus left the story unfinished because it's an invitation to each of us to finish the story for ourselves. There are lots and lots of reasons for us to sit out in the darkness and nurse our wounds and bitterness and anger, but the invitation is to come inside and feast.

Amen.