

## A New Righteousness: Pursuing Happiness

“We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the pursuit of Happiness.” It seems these days that most of our laws and legal arguments revolve around the protections of life and liberty but our society as a whole seems more taken up with the problem of the pursuit of happiness. This morning, I want to offer some observations how our culture defines happiness and the notion of the good life that brings happiness and then turn to what we can learn from the Bible on this same subject. We will look at three different examples of how the Scriptures tell us that the good life can be achieved as well as at a reminder that how the Bible answers the question of the pursuit of happiness may not be quite in harmony with how our culture answers it; indeed, the two may be diametrically opposed.

The keys to happiness and the good life are pretty clear from our cultural viewpoint. If something is thought to be desirable, somebody is marketing it to make a buck. The marketers do not waste their time on promoting things that people actually need. Instead, the focus is on our desires. The desires may be related to our needs but we are encouraged to crave a certain, marketable brand of necessities. Instead of being reminded to eat (and some of us need very little reminder), we are directed toward a certain kind of food, obtainable at a local grocery store or restaurant. Certain drugs will help us sleep and certain regimens will enable us to perpetuate our family lineage – all for a price, of course. Our sense of security, personal or financial, is constantly questioned; then we are offered solutions in the form of easy payments on alarm systems or low introductory fees from financial institutions. We all need to feel loved but do we really need to change the way we look or smell or the things we eat or drink to find fellowship? The ads would have us believe so and if that doesn't work, somebody will sell us a membership in a scheme to find us the perfect mate. And so on. In 2011, happiness and the good life are tied to the commoditization of life.

But this has not always been the case. In the past and still for some, when basic needs were satisfied, the questions of happiness were more related to one's actual relationships with one's fellows and with whatever power was understood to control the course of life. These questions are the basis of all of the world's great religions. In the books that have been perceived as sacred writings around the world, we find the struggles of great thinkers with the question of how to live the good life or how to live the God life. This is ultimately the theme of all three of the monotheistic, Abrahamic religions – Judaism, Christianity and Islam. How do we live in a way that pleases God for surely this is the most important good of all and the one from which all other blessings flow. Psalm 15, a modern version of which we used for our Call to Worship, asks, “O LORD, who may abide in your tent? Who may dwell on your holy hill?” In a passage I've not read this morning but which I know is familiar to us all, the prophet Micah asks, “With what shall I come before the LORD, and bow myself before God on high?” Men and women came to Jesus and asked, “What is the most important commandment,” and “Lord, what must I do to be saved?”

The Psalmist and the prophet gave the answers to those questions in the way they believed God had inspired them. For the Psalmist, the answer involves how one interacts with God and with others. Who may come before God and live? “Those who walk blamelessly, and do what is right, and speak the truth from their heart; who do not slander with their tongue, and do no evil to their friends, nor take up a reproach against their neighbors; in whose eyes the wicked are

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despised, but who honor those who fear the LORD; who stand by their oath even to their hurt; who do not lend money at interest, and do not take a bribe against the innocent. Those who do these things shall never be moved.” For Micah, the answer is also tied to one’s relationship to both God and other people but he boils it down in a way that is memorable, “He has told you, O mortal, what is good; and what does the LORD require of you but to do justice, and to love kindness, and to walk humbly with your God?”

Perhaps if pressed, both the Psalmist and Micah would have summed up their teachings in this regard with the word *tsedakah*, which we translate “righteousness”: the quality of being morally right, fair, just and virtuous. Jesus, of course, had a good deal to say about righteous, living a life pleasing to God. His longest discourse recorded in the Synoptic Gospels on the theme is in the Gospel According to Matthew and we know it as “The Sermon on the Mount.” For the next six weeks, we will be studying this great teaching – a time afforded us in the liturgical calendar by a late Easter and, therefore, a late beginning to Lent, which lengthens the season of Epiphany. As the readings we normally associate with Epiphany reveal Jesus as the Christ, the Messiah of God, so do these readings reveal to us the core of Jesus’ teaching and how we are called to live as disciples, obeying everything he taught, as he charged his disciples in the Great Commission. In this first section of the Sermon on the Mount, the Beatitudes, Jesus gives us a definition of happiness and how to attain it that stands against the shallow, marketable definitions of our culture and instead draws on the concepts offered in Psalm 15 and Micah 6.

To understand Jesus’ definition of happiness, we must first unlearn the traditional English translation of verses 3 through 11 in Matthew 5. In the old King James Version and the more modern translations which draw from it, the Revised Standard Version, the New Revised Standard widely used here at Good Shepherd, the New International Version and others, the repetitive word is blessed: “Blessed are the poor in spirit... blessed are those who mourn... blessed are the meek...” and so on. We actually find a more accurate translation in the “simplified” versions popular in the 60s and 70s, “Good News for Modern Man” and the Living Bible, as well as in the highly poetic translation made by Catholic scholars, the Jerusalem Bible: “Happy are the poor in spirit... Happy are those who mourn... Happy are the meek...” Some 1740 years before Thomas Jefferson affirmed that the pursuit of happiness was an inalienable right of humankind, endowed by our Creator, Jesus gave us the model for true happiness. The Greek word used by Matthew to record Jesus’ teaching is μακάριος and the late Raymond Brown, a New Testament scholar who was the first Roman Catholic to be granted tenure at the Protestants’ Union Theological Seminary, wrote that μακάριος “recognize(s) an existing state of happiness...”

What we must hear as we read the Beatitudes then, is not a promise to the groups of people named that they will be happy in the future but that these are the people who have already found the secret to a happy life. In his fine book, Jesus Through Middle Eastern Eyes, Kenneth E. Bailey gives a concrete example of how the Beatitudes are structured: “...we could say, ‘Blessed is the happy daughter of Mr. Jones because she will inherit the Jones’s farm.’ The woman in question is *already* the happy daughter of Mr. Jones. She is not working to earn the farm. Everyone knows that a key element in her happy and secure life is that she and the community around her know that the farm will one day be hers.” Jesus called the ones he pointed to happy because they were secure in the knowledge that they walked in the way of God. They had

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already learned the lessons of the Psalmist and of Micah. This is what it means in the Beatitudes to be blessed. Friedrich Hauck wrote in The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament that “The special feature of... μακάριος... in the NT is that it refers overwhelmingly to the distinctive religious joy which accrues to man from his share in the salvation of the kingdom of God.” Parenthetically, I would add that those of you who have not been forcibly exposed to The Theological Dictionary of the New Testament have also experienced a special μακάριος. The TDNT, as it is popularly known, is a standard reference work much feared by seminarians for its enormous multi-volume length and its tiny print. But I digress...

Now that we understand that Jesus is talking about present happiness let us look more closely at those whom he says are so blessed. Again, we must do a little digging to interpret words that have become obscure after being translated from Aramaic to Greek to English and by being taken from the context of first century Palestinian Judaism to twenty-first century America. What, for example, does Jesus mean by “the poor in spirit”? In the parallel to this verse in the Gospel According to Luke, Jesus says, “Blessed are the poor.” Is there a difference? To answer these questions, both Kenneth Bailey and my former professor Dr. Glenn Stassen point to Jesus’ connections to the words of Isaiah, the prophet from whom he often quoted. In Isaiah 66:2, God speaks of those who are in God’s will: “But this is the one to whom I will look, to the humble and contrite in spirit, who trembles at my word.” The word translated as “humble” in the NRSV, *anawim*, was previously translated in the King James as “poor.” It refers to those who may be poor in the things of this world or not but who recognize their powerlessness before God and their need of God’s grace. They are happy because for them the Kingdom of God is already at work – they acknowledge that God alone is king, not any human and certainly not themselves. To be able to remember always that God is in charge brings a peace of mind that certainly equates to any definition of happiness.

“Happy are those who mourn...” Now that just sounds like an outright contradiction to us but again we must consider a deeper meaning than we usually use. Clarence Jordan was a great New Testament scholar who wrote The Cotton Patch Version of the New Testament and who started the communitarian Koinonia Farm which later gave rise to Habitat for Humanity. He wrote of this seeming contradiction, “A mourner is not necessarily one who weeps. He is one who expresses a deep concern. If the one about whom he is concerned dies, he might express his grief by crying; he might also do it by praying, or in some other way. Tears aren’t essential to mourning, but deep concern is.” Those who mourn are the ones who are deeply concerned for others. They mourn when they see injustice. They mourn over evil in the world and in their own lives. Like the poor in spirit, they look at the world and see the need for God, for humankind to follow God’s will and for Creation to be redeemed. But they are happy because they also know that God’s kingdom *has* been inaugurated, that the Beloved Community *is* gathering. As Martin Luther King said, “the arc of the moral universe is long but it bends toward justice.” Happy are the ones who are concerned for others and for the state of their own souls for they are and will be comforted.

“Happy are the meek, for they will inherit the earth.” Jesus here is quoting from Psalm 37 which specifically concerns the Promised Land of Israel. “...those who wait for the LORD shall inherit the land... the meek shall inherit the land, and delight themselves in abundant prosperity... The righteous shall inherit the land, and live in it forever.” It is a direct admonishment from Jesus to

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the spiritually proud and the violent who either expected to force the Romans from the land or to control them and stay in power as they had done under the Greeks and the Persians before them. The word translated as “meek” in the Psalms is the same Hebrew as used in Isaiah that we have previously discussed as meaning “poor in spirit” and the meaning here is much the same. The ones who will inherit *Eretz Y'israel* are those who rely on God, not on their own power, on horses and chariots and armaments. Again, Clarence Jordan, who by the way was an alumnus of The Southern Baptist Theological Seminary, has an important word of interpretation: “It is thought that a meek person is something of a doormat upon which everyone wipes his feet, a timid soul who lives in mortal fear of offending his fellow creatures. But nothing could be more foreign to the Biblical use of the word. It is used in particular to describe two persons: Moses and Jesus. One of them defied the might of Egypt and the other couldn't be cowed by a powerful Roman official... Both of them seemed absolutely fearless in the face of men, and completely surrendered to the will of God.” In Classic Greek usage, the word used in Matthew for meek refers to those who are able to keep the “Golden Mean” between recklessness and cowardice – they become angry, as Kenneth Bailey describes, “on the right grounds against the right person in the right manner at the right moment and for the right length of time.” Happy are the ones whose wills are surrendered to God and who act rightly towards others – they are and will be secure in their place on Earth.

The fourth and fifth beatitudes are more easily accessible to us. “Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Blessed are the merciful, for they will receive mercy.” It is important to remember that Jesus did not say, “Happy are the righteous.” The journey to righteousness is a continual one in this life. We rise every morning to claim our identity as those who have been baptized, those who have been forgiven. And every day we do our best to walk humbly with God, seeing Jesus more clearly, loving him more dearly and following him more nearly. Every day, we rely on the mercy of God to be forgiven anew for all the ways in which we succumb to our brokenness and the brokenness around us that calls so strongly and sweetly that we shift our gaze from our need for Christ to selfish desire. But we know that when we pursue God's righteousness as if we were starving for it, as if our throats were dry and our lips were cracked from want of it, then we will indeed stay in the will of God and the One who is truly righteous will forgive our every trespass. And as we experience the mercy of God, so shall we become more merciful ourselves and so shall we learn to appreciate God's mercy more and more. It is a feedback loop, the relationship between God's mercy and ours but so is the reverse. Lack of mercy redounds upon itself, grudge upon grudge, hatred upon hatred, as we see in Israel/Palestine today, in Serbo-Croatia, in Ireland, in Rwanda, and in the shrill voices here at home where what should be polite discussion devolves into a bullet. Happy are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness. Happy are the merciful.

Psalm 24 asks and answers a similar question to our Psalm 15 from earlier: “Who shall ascend the hill of the Lord? And who shall stand in his holy place? Those who have clean hands and pure hearts...” Jesus undoubtedly had this Psalm in mind in his teaching — again, a fairly straightforward concept. I have always loved the teaching from the great Danish theologian and philosopher Søren Kierkegaard who wrote, “Purity of heart is to will one thing.” For the pure in heart there is no duplicity, no hidden agenda. Their hearts and minds are pointed in one direction only. In serving God they see all around them the evidence of God's presence. Truly they are happy, as are the peacemakers. In the hilarious Monty Python spoof of the story of Jesus, “The

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Life of Brian,” one hard of hearing disciple turns to another as they listen to Jesus on the mountain. “What did he say?” “I think he said, ‘Blessed are the cheese makers,’” says the other. I liked to remind Daniel Scalise of that when he was working at Beecher’s. But the happiness of peacemakers is a truth that we claim at Good Shepherd every week as we end our worship in singing “Shalom.” We know that as we spread God’s peace in our lives and the world around us, we are truly living as children of God. Happy are the pure in heart. Happy are the peacemakers.

Finally we come to the two beatitudes with which we have very little personal experience. Few if any of us have been truly persecuted for the sake of righteousness. Oh, we may have been reviled a bit and had false things said against us. Some may have lost jobs or had doors closed against them for standing up for what their hearts told them was God’s way. But none of us has been in danger of death or even bodily injury, I think, for keeping faith with Jesus. His words are a good reminder to us, however, that those who’ve not yet taken him as Lord of their lives will often fail to understand us at best and hate us at worst for what we proclaim. As our brother Paul wrote to the Church in Corinth: “For the message about the cross is foolishness to those who are perishing, but to us who are being saved it is the power of God... For since, in the wisdom of God, the world did not know God through wisdom, God decided, through the foolishness of our proclamation, to save those who believe. For Jews demand signs and Greeks desire wisdom, but we proclaim Christ crucified, a stumbling block to Jews and foolishness to Gentiles, but to those who are the called, both Jews and Greeks, Christ the power of God and the wisdom of God. For God’s foolishness is wiser than human wisdom, and God’s weakness is stronger than human strength. Consider your own call, brothers and sisters: not many of you were wise by human standards, not many were powerful, not many were of noble birth. But God chose what is foolish in the world to shame the wise; God chose what is weak in the world to shame the strong; God chose what is low and despised in the world, things that are not, to reduce to nothing things that are, so that no one might boast in the presence of God. He is the source of your life in Christ Jesus, who became for us wisdom from God, and righteousness and sanctification and redemption, in order that, as it is written, “Let the one who boasts, boast in the Lord.””

The good life that we seek in Christ, the “God Life,” if you will, is very different from the good life promoted by our culture. Our understanding of what it means to be happy is not based on our selfish desires, inflated by the ever-present hot air of marketing. In Jesus, we have our model of how to live the abundant life: loving God with all our hearts and minds and loving our neighbors as ourselves. In following the way of Jesus, we find true happiness, blessedness, *μακαριος*. Let us rise and go forth from this place encouraged, strengthened in our resolve to live as Jesus would have us live, so that we may always experience God’s welcome to the holy mountain from which come the words of peace and mercy, and the everflowing streams of righteousness. Amen.