

**“What Makes Us Happy?”**  
**Text: Psalm 34:1-10; James 1:17-27**  
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*Every generous act of giving, with every perfect gift is from above, coming down from the Father of lights, with whom there is no variation or shadow due to change. James 1:17*

I confess to a certain wishy-washiness about the title of today's sermon. All week long, I debated whether or not it should have a question mark at the end. “What makes us happy?” or, “What makes us happy.” I opted for the question mark, because without it, I might have set you up to expect me to offer up a list of conditions, circumstances and occasions guaranteed to lift your spirit and put a smile on your face. From the sermon I almost preached - the one without the question mark - you might have received such advice as: get yourself a dog; hold a little baby; choose a team that will surely win the pennant this year. The problem with my telling you how to be happy is you. You are the problem. Some of you love dogs, but some of you don't, and some of you are allergic to dog hair. Sometimes it is just great to hold a little baby, but sometimes not. The last time I held one, it turned out that a major diaper change was an immediate necessity. As for your teams winning the pennant, I don't know whom you ought to pull for. My teams rarely win. Victory for my team might be utter joy for me, but could spell emotional disaster for you. Happiness is a tricky thing. We had friends who for years went together to Georgia- Florida games. It made them very happy, it seemed. One couple were Gator fans. The other two rooted for the Georgia Bulldogs. Finally, they got so mad at each other, they not only stopped going to ball games, they barely spoke to one another. It became a very unhappy situation.

Of course there are a lot of salesmen and women who believe they have the key to your future happiness, and they try to sell it to you. They want you to buy a time share at the beach; they want you to buy a triple whopper hamburger. What do they say now? You want to super size that? I guess that would be six layers of meat on that whopper burger. A novel piece of gadgetry, particularly in the technology department, is always something that might make us happy, but then, when the novelty wears off, we're not so happy. The hamburger has given you heartburn. The time share turns out to have a dumpster right outside the plate glass window. Things don't always make us happy over the long haul.

An insightful writer in the *Chronicle Review* reflects, "It is the paradox of modernity that as choice and material prosperity increase, health and personal satisfaction decrease."

Some preachers think they have the key to your happiness and mine. They preach material success as if that gospel were the Gospel of Jesus Christ. I am convinced it is not. Right here in Atlanta, we have the golden prince of this brand of alleged Christianity. One of the most popular preachers, with perhaps the largest church in Atlanta, is Creflo Dollar, who preaches a prosperity gospel. A lot of people are drawn to that, as if God's main reason for being was to fulfill all our material and financial dreams. I once overheard two pastors speaking in a hospital parking lot. They had obviously been to visit their parishioners, as I had myself. I was behind them as they were walking to their cars. And one said to the other, "What are you driving these days?"

The other pastor answered, "The Lord has blessed me with a Cadillac." Of course, this was years ago, when people were actually able to buy new cars, but you get the point.

Thankfully, in most Presbyterian churches, you do not hear the prosperity gospel, but then, neither do you hear much said about pleasure, about happiness, about joy. I love the 51st Psalm which was the basis of our Prayer of Confession this morning. It is attributed to David, after he realizes his sinfulness with regard to Uriah and Bathsheba. He prays to God, "Restore to me the joy of your salvation." When we are lined up right with God and with the best that we know, we will be happy; we will be joyful.

In most Presbyterian churches, the words "joy," "happiness," and "pleasure" are not mentioned as often as they ought to be. And if the truth be told, we're a little suspicious of joy. We like duty, yes we do, and we like doctrines, but we're a little suspicious of happiness. When those feelings of suspicion come up within us, we have joined that company of Christians who are the spiritual heirs of the dour side of Puritanism. You remember H. L. Mencken's definition of a Puritan - a Puritan is one who is desperately afraid that someone, somewhere might be having a good time. Actually, the Puritans who settled in Massachusetts were neither somber nor morose. They wore brightly-colored clothes; they loved festivals; they took genuine pleasure in the right ordering of society, though I don't want to put too much of a halo on their heads. There were those Salem witch trials and everything. Obviously, the Puritans had some ambivalence about joy and happiness in 17<sup>th</sup> century America.

In 18<sup>th</sup> century Scotland, a time and place where many modern Presbyterians feel a particular affinity because of our deep Scottish roots as Presbyterians, there was one little Scottish village that had a "rule that said that a rowboat was preferable to a sailboat on Sunday. Why? Because the sailboat, though easier, might be more enjoyable." (1)

Today, I want to go a little farther back than these relatively recent centuries. Back, in fact, several thousand years ago to visit a couple of Biblical texts and see what they have to say about enjoyment and pleasure. I could've consulted any number of modern commentators, psychologists, and sociologists, who are currently writing about this subject, but this is not "Sixty Minutes"; we're not the *New Yorker* magazine. We are in the Church of Jesus Christ. We have come, not for conventional wisdom, or to listen to what university professors have to tell us, though they have many wise and helpful things to say. We are here to turn to our Judeo-Christian tradition, in search of wisdom and guidance for the living of our days. I recently read that the average American spends 8 1/2 hours a day in front of one kind of screen or another. I don't think that's an indicator of happiness. I think that's a sign that it's time to wake up and live life instead of watching it. Let's spend just a few minutes asking the Bible about how we can live a happy human life.

We will start with the Psalms, which themselves start with the word "happy". The first word of the first Psalm in the Psalter is "happy". "Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked or take the path that sinners tread, nor sit in the seat of scoffers. Their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law, they meditate day and night." Theologian Ellen Charry notes that in the Bible's view, goodness and pleasure are inseparable. She puts it so eloquently and clearly, "Goodness and pleasure cannot be separated, for we are created in such a way that doing good naturally pleases us." That is the way God made us. (2) Throughout the Hebrew scriptures you find the understanding of happiness as "the ability to live a virtuous life" that results in one's own well-being, the well-being of others, and indeed the well-being of society itself. For the Biblical writers, happiness was not a flighty emotion. *Oh I feel happy today. Yesterday I was sad, and tomorrow, I might be a little sad, and then maybe I'll be happy again.* It wasn't like that. No matter what outside circumstances are or what your internal, emotional weather report might be, we can be, will be happy if we have avoided the ways of the wicked and consciously chosen the way of God. Those who do that will be "like trees planted by the streams of water, which yield their fruit in their season and their leaves do not wither." This is a very long way from prosperity preaching.

I'll tell you something else that seems far away in another direction. How long has it been since you've heard or used the word "wicked"? It seems to me that maybe we ought to take that word out of the dustbin of history and bring it into modern parlance now and then, not so that people can feel self-righteous and better than other people or sneer at the hedonism of others, but so that the right labels can be put on things. And yes, on people who do terrible wrongs. This fellow in California who kidnapped the little girl and held her hostage for years, if that isn't wickedness, I don't know what is. There is no excuse, whatsoever, for victimizing vulnerable people. It is wicked and without justification.

We live in an age when absolutely anything goes. The level of sexual degradation and exploitation has reached unprecedented heights. Excessive self-gratification might have carried the day, but it will never lead to long-lasting health or happiness.

The idea that anything goes in terms of financial dealings has led us to the global crisis we are facing today. One commentator asks, in commenting on the widespread mental complicity that we all seem to have with the idea that anything goes as long as we're making money – “Why should anyone have fallen for the idea that leaving people to pursue their self-interests and nothing else, would result in anything other than the wholesale pillaging of our hard-earned savings and investments?” (3) Self-deception, recklessness, indifference to others: Are these not but new terms for what, back in the day, the Psalmist called “wicked”? The Psalmist writes of the wicked as being like chaff, blowing in the wind. Recently, we have seen chaff swirling around us, have we not?

Over and over again, the Psalmist writes of goodness and happiness as intrinsically connected to one another. The Psalmist also makes the case that trust in God is the doorway to happiness. *Taste and see that the Lord is good. Happy are those who take refuge in the Lord. Those who seek the Lord lack for no good thing.* Notice this double imperative: *taste and see*. Not a bad suggestion. Use your senses to remind yourself that the Lord does provide. There is evidence all around - Biblical evidence - the manna from heaven that fed the children of Israel in the wilderness, the body of Christ which was to sustain his disciples in the form of bread. Around us today, we experience the wonder, the bounty of nature, the delights of human sexuality, the deliciousness of a pancake covered with warm, maple syrup. *Taste and see that the Lord is good.*

The key to happiness is not whether or not things are going well for us. At any given time, some things are going well, some are going terribly. The key is whether or not we are aware of how graciously God gives us what we need to make it through whatever we've got to go through. That kind of happiness is not dependent on emotions or external circumstances. It comes from trust. *Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I shall fear no evil, for Thou art with me. Thy rod and thy staff, they comfort me.* Life is a gift from God, and as long as we live it, we will be nourished by God, like trees planted by the water, so that we can become the living image of God, whatever the situation. When we realize that God will care for us, it “makes us happy.” (4)

I visited recently with an elderly friend of mine; she is in her 90s, weighs less than 100 pounds, cannot take a step without the aid of the lady who stays with her. She lives a rather isolated life. I asked her if she ever got lonely or depressed. She looked at me as if I were crazy. She said, “Every morning I open my eyes. And I have this wonderful friend who helps me get dressed. Gets me out in the kitchen to the breakfast table, and do you know what happens next, Joanna?

She pours me a delicious cup of hot coffee, and before 10 o'clock everyday, my daughter calls. I'm a happy person."

In the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus says, "Blessed (or happy) are the poor in spirit, those who mourn, those who hunger and thirst for righteousness..." You would think it would be just the opposite. You're happy when nobody you loved has died, but no. *Happy are those who mourn*. Jesus means that happiness is less about getting your needs met, as you understand them, than it is about getting lined up with the great purposes of the kingdom of God. He speaks of an almost subversive kind of happiness, the reverse of the conventional wisdom. Jesus says, "If you want to save yourself, stop worrying about yourself all the time. Lose yourself. Those who lose their lives, even for my sake, and for the sake of the Gospel, those are the ones who will save their lives."

This brings us finally to the little Letter of James. Once again, happiness and goodness are intertwined in the mind of the writer. James believes that once we have waked up to the fact that everything good that we have is a gift from God, including our own capacity to give gifts, then we will become happy and live very satisfied existences. Interestingly, for him faith is not a set of beliefs, but ways of behavior: be slow to anger; get rid of sordidness; be doers of the word, not merely hearers. In writing about all of this, Will Willimon says, "What we do in church on Sunday morning, when we receive the offering, is that we are having our lives transformed from the mere making of a living, to the living of a life. . . . Our religious sentiments touch the earth when the offering plates are passed." (5) Because God created us to be generous, we are happiest when we are allowing our God-given, God-reflecting trade of generosity to flourish. We are wired to give.

Our Morningside Preschool is just about to start. Soon in the children's wing of the church, the kiddos will be sitting at their tables, in their little chairs, doing various art projects. Every week or so, they make gifts for their moms and dads for some occasion or another, something out of popsicle sticks, and clay, and pipe cleaners, that kind of thing. I think about how the children will smile with delight when they get home and present their gifts to their mom, their dad. Happy, so happy that they have something to give to someone they love. (6) Whether you are five or fifty, that really is life at its best.

Twenty-five years ago, I was in the African country of Ghana. I went with a group of American ministers to learn about Presbyterian mission in Africa. I recall one hot, oppressively hot night, no stars, just humidity. We were staying in a concrete building. There was to be worship that night, but I had decided to lie on my bunk and feel sorry for myself. The electricity was off; my stomach was upset. My heart was homesick, and I have to tell you, that night I did not give a hoot about the church's mission in Africa. Someone in the worship service, however, noted my absence, and I was summoned. I got up, miserable, walked into the little gathering place where people were worshipping. Someone extended a hand to me

and invited me to get up and join the dancing that was going on after the offering had been received. I didn't want to dance – whooo – I didn't want to dance. But I wanted to be sweet, and after awhile, I was dancing, as where all the other American preachers, rather awkwardly, I might say. We were dancing, but we were also learning, learning from our friends, our teachers in Ghana, who faced daily more frustrations and deprivations than we could ever have conceived of. We were learning that God is greater than any immediate cause for despair. We were learning that there is no situation in which we cannot taste and see that the Lord is good. That's the secret; that's the key that unlocks the door to a good and happy life.

Praise God, from whom all blessings flow.

(1) Maria Harris, *Proclaim Jubilee*, Westminster John Knox Press, 1996, p.33.

(2) Ellen T. Charry, "Happy Pursuits," *Christian Century*, July 24, 1997, pp. 31-33.

(3) Dennis P. McCann, "Hard Times," *Christian Century*, July 28, 2009, p.22.

(4) Charry.

(5) William H. Willimon, *Pulpit Resource*, July, August, September, 2009.

(6) Ibid.