

The Pursuit of Happiness

John 15:9-17

Whitefish UMC

May 17, 2009

- † “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.” So begins the Declaration of Independence, as every school child learns.
- † The pursuit of happiness—it preoccupies us all our lives. No more so than in wedding season, which is upon us in full force. In meeting with couples who are planning to marry, I always ask what it is they hope for in their marriage.
- † Invariably the response comes, along with a look that says, “well, duh.” “We just want to be happy;” or maybe “we just want to make each other happy.” And then, invariably, I try hard not to sigh deeply, old married woman that I am for 37 years.
- † The world, it seems, wants us to strive for happiness above all else. As I prepared this sermon, I couldn’t get our friend Brittney out of my mind. Brittney, the daughter of our closest friends, is almost thirty and still loves the song from a cartoon called Ren and Stimpy.
- † For your listening and viewing pleasure, here’s a portion of a youtube video featuring Ren and Stimpy’s themesong, “Happy Happy, Joy, Joy.” (Play song and end at the line “The problem is you’re not happy enough.”)

- † Brittney can sometimes be the happiest person in the world. But she can also be the saddest. She has Asperger’s Syndrome, seizure disorders, and was abused by her daycare provider when she was three years old. Although deeply loved, her life is a rollercoaster ride of emotional highs and lows.
- † Brittney also loves the song, “Don’t Worry, Be Happy.” But she, like the rest of us, just can’t seem to follow its advice very well. Happiness is apparently in short supply these days.
- † Did you know that in the not too distant past the most popular course at Harvard was Psychology 1504? Positive Psychology it is called, and its subtitle is “How to Get Happy.” Nine hundred students attended lectures by Professor Ben Sharar, who got happy by taking himself off the tenure track at Harvard because not having to publish makes him happy.
- † The course emphasizes what makes people happy rather than their pathologies—that is the secret of the popularity of the course. Isn’t it interesting that even if you go to Harvard you have to take a course to learn how to be happy?
- † Of course there is plenty to be unhappy about these days, right? The economy, the deterioration of the environment, war, disease, terrorism—just to name a few—give us cause to be miserable, if we choose. And then there are the day-to-day issues of our own individual lives that give us more than enough to lose sleep over.
- † Strange, then, that the Bible passages for today speak so much of joy. Take the beautiful psalm that we read:
O sing to the Lord a new song...
Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth,

break forth into joyous song...

Let the hills sing together for joy.

- † And the gospel for this morning adds another twist. It's not as if there is nothing to worry about. It's hardly a happy occasion. It's the occasion of Jesus' betrayal, the night of his arrest, the last supper on the evening before his death. Jesus knows what is going to happen.
- † His words to his friends are what is known as his Farewell Discourse. It's a somber, serious moment. "You are my friends... You did not choose me; I chose you—abide in my love... I have said these things to you that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."
- † Jesus wasn't happy at that moment. He must have been digging deep within to find the courage to face what was to come. Just a few hours later, he would bare his soul to God in the Garden of Gethsemane and beg for deliverance from the pain and torment and death of the cross. And who can blame him?
- † But at the heart of it "is something remarkable, something unexpected and counterintuitive, something revolutionary and life-changing, something he called 'his joy.' 'I'm saying this,' he says, 'I'm living and suffering and dying,' not that you should be sad, grim, angry, vengeful, determined, but, of all things, that 'my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.'" (Buchanan)
- † How can that be? We are so busy buying into the big lie that satisfying our wants, gratifying our desires, will make us happy that we have missed the point. We are looking for happiness in all the wrong places.
- † The Harvard Happiness course offers six tips:

1. Give yourself permission to be human.
2. Happiness comes when you do things that are pleasurable and meaningful.
3. Keep in mind that happiness depends on your state of mind, not the state of your bank account.
4. Simplify.
5. Exercise, eat right, and get enough sleep.
6. Express gratitude.

† And these are indeed helpful ideas for harried, hassled, hurried, sleep-deprived people who are always late and never have enough time.

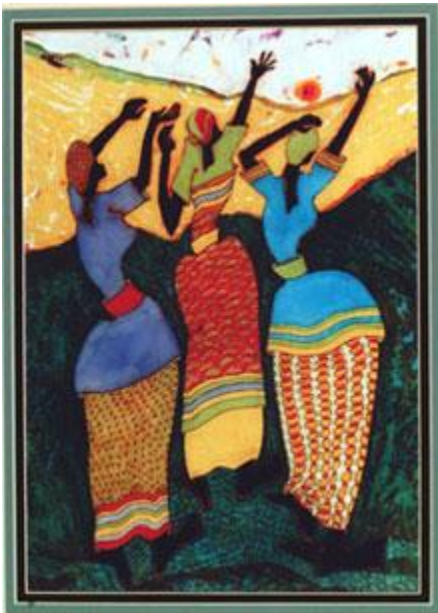
They are good advice.

† The only problem is that they miss the point. The problem is not, as Ren and Stimpy say, that we are not happy enough.

† What's missing is not happiness, but joy—the joy that comes from gaining your life by losing it, that comes when you find someone and something to love passionately, something important enough to live and die for. This is God's joy—the joy Jesus said was his too and that he wants to be full and complete in your heart and mine.

As Daniel Clendenin says, “Joy can be an ambiguous term. Many people link it with happiness, health, success, fame, wealth, pleasure, fun, or good fortune. In that sense of the word joy is derivative, it's attached to and dependent upon some external source. Joy of that sort can exude a sense of smugness, entitlement, narcissism, and even self-pity in the absence of desired objects. Such joy seldom lasts for long or is genuinely fulfilling, for it creates its own set of needs that are rarely satisfied. We all know privileged people who enjoy the most fortunate of personal circumstances

but who are never content and always unhappy, and, conversely, people who possess little but nevertheless radiate equanimity and gladness. And which is sadder, that one could be so easily fulfilled by so very little—a new car, a bigger house, a better job; or that you readily miss so much—the blast of the ram's horn or the shout from the rooftop? "What an upside-down state of affairs," wrote the philosopher Boethius (480–525), "when a person who is divine by his gift of reason thinks his excellence depends on the possession of lifeless bric-a-brac!"



And the Sun Came

Genuine joy is more elusive, more subtle and more nuanced than happiness, pleasure or good fortune. In his autobiography *Surprised By Joy* CS Lewis describes joy as "an unsatisfied desire which is itself more desirable than any other satisfaction. . . I doubt whether anyone who has tasted it would ever, if both were in his power, exchange it for all the pleasures in the world." Whereas we can manipulate circumstances to our own advantage to obtain what we think will bring happiness, or expend great efforts in pleasure-seeking, joy is entirely gratuitous. You cannot earn it, buy it, or deserve it. It is a divine gift to receive rather than a selfish goal to pursue.

The opposite of joy is not sadness or sorrow but anxiety. Jesus encouraged his followers, "do not worry about your life. . . Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to his life?" Consider the joy of the birds in their morning songs, or the flowers in their spring time glory, he said. If the

Lord of the universe clothes creation with such extravagance, then we can rejoice in his love regardless of our circumstances.

Similarly, the close cousin of joy is not happiness but confidence. Kierkegaard — the famously melancholy Dane — made this connection between joy and confidence. "If at every moment, both present and future, it were eternally certain that nothing has happened or can ever happen, not even the most fearful horror invented by the most morbid imagination and translated into fact, which can separate us from God's love — here would be reason for joy."

Psalm 98's invitation to joy is based upon what God has done and will do. He has done marvelous things. He has remembered his love. He has extended salvation far beyond Israel to "the ends of the earth." And in the future, says the psalmist, God "will judge the world in righteousness and the peoples with equity." Many people cringe when they hear God described as the "judge of the earth" (98:9). But for the the psalmist, and I can well imagine for the people in



Dancing in the Clouds

Darfur or the Congo or Iraq, the promise that the global God will right all wrongs is a cause for confidence and joy.

† In a world plagued with wars, starvation, HIV-AIDS, inequities of all sorts, and preventable suffering, with leaders who manipulate us with the politics of fear, perhaps nothing is more radical or counter-

- cultural than to live with joy and confidence. But living joyfully because of God's lavish love, said the mystic Juliana of Norwich (14th century), is the greatest honor that we can give Almighty God.”
- † C. S. Lewis described this deep gladness this way in his wonderful book, *The Lion, the Witch, and the Wardrobe*...
 - † Perhaps it has sometimes happened to you in a dream that someone says something which you don't understand but in the dream it feels as if it had some enormous meaning—either a terrifying one which turns into a nightmare or else a lovely meaning too lovely to put into words, which makes the dream so beautiful that you remember it all your life and are always wishing you could get into that dream again. It was like that now. At the name of Aslan each one of the children felt something jump in his inside... Susan felt as if some delicious smell or some delightful strain of music had just floated by her. And Lucy got the feeling you have when you wake up in the morning and realize that it is the beginning of the holidays or the beginning of summer.”
 - † Frederick Buechner says, “We are above all things loved,” and people who know that and believe it and trust it “should come together like people who have just won the Irish Sweepstakes. It should have us throwing our arms around each other.
 - † Of course there are plenty of things to fear and worry about. Unhappiness is understandable and real. But as Buechner reminds us, “at the heart of darkness there is joy unimaginable.... Joy is home. God created us in joy and for joy. God's joy is in our blood.”

† Jesus said, “I have said these things to you that my joy may be in you and that your joy may be complete.” May we honor and praise him with our joy. Amen.

Sources:

Daniel Clendenin, <http://www.journeywithjesus.net>

John Buchanan, “More than Happy,” <http://fourthchurch.org>

“HappyHappyJoyJoy” youtube.com