

“Whatever Happened To Happiness”

Date: Feb. 11, 2007

Text: Luke 6: 17-26

Originally the worship committee planned to have our second jazz service on the Sunday before Lent begins, which is a growing practice among churches across the country. Our teenagers, however, are going to be on retreat next weekend and the committee wanted them to be able to participate. As it worked out, there couldn't be a more appropriate Sunday for some foot tapping than after this week of bitter cold weather.

Preparation for the service got me to thinking about a larger question: the pursuit of happiness in this country. Lloyd Oglivie in his book on the Beatitudes tells this story

A father said to his daughter and a new son-in-law just before they left on their honeymoon, “Listen, your mother and I have worked hard to provide you two with all the things we never had when we started out. Now you'd better be happy!”

Oglivie went on,

Quite a mandate. You guessed it. The young couple was no happier than the father and mother despite all they had been given. That got me to thinking: Whatever happened to happiness? We all want it; we all talk about it; we are in a mad scramble for it; and yet, there are so few really happy people. The question has rumbled about in my mind. It has prompted me to think deeply about why so few people are happy. Get in touch with your real feelings. Are you happy? If so, why? If not, why not? What change would make you completely happy?

Luke offers an abbreviated form of the Beatitudes that are found in the Sermon on the Mount in Matthew's gospel. Jesus was addressing his closest followers and not just casual bystanders. The word “blessed” is a synonym for “happiness” and when found in pagan Greek literature of the 1st Century it meant the highest form of well-being such as enjoyed by the gods. The actual word in Greek is “makarios” from which we get our word “macaroni.” Maybe the mall toyshop called “The Happy Noodle” knows something about Greek. What Jesus suggested was that those who followed him would be constantly moving away from fear and anxiety toward peace and well being by living lives that were tremendously full and productive. They would be happy.

If you read these few verses again and think about them during the week you will observe that what our Lord is suggesting leads to happiness isn't the same as you hear in all those TV commercials. No mention of material possessions; happiness is not ascribed to being a success at work or purchasing a new car, having a good line of credit or any of the things that loom so large in our society. Of course we like to say, “Well, those things really aren't important to me” but if we are truthful all of us are caught up in this drive for more and better.

A mystic from India was being introduced to NY City. His guide, with more nerve than wisdom, took him to Times Square at the peak of the morning rush hour. The visitor was appalled at what he saw - people with attaché cases pushing hard and rushing madly. The mystic could only think to ask: “Is there a wolf behind them?” “No, said his guide, “there's a dollar in front of them.”

Paradoxically the people that Jesus described as the happiest are those who by society's standards should be the unhappiest: “those who mourn, those who are meek, those trying to be peacemakers, those who are persecuted for righteousness sake.” None of these types would make the front of Time or any other magazine as the person of the year.

You have to deal with this tremendous reversal in values if you are serious about understanding what Jesus said is the true path to happiness then. The Donald Trumps of the world are not the ones who would receive Jesus' praise rather it would be some obscure individual volunteering in a hospital or working on a house for Habitat. Indeed this reversal in values is crucial to understanding the New Testament. Jesus was forever saying, "the first shall be last and the last first." It doesn't make sense that God should send his son as a suffering servant. It doesn't make sense that the humble and loving, whether rich or poor, will inherit the earth. It doesn't make sense according to our standards but it is God's way!

I am afraid that we may be caught in a terrible bind. We all want to be happy. There is no doubt about that. We all feel that Christianity can help or we wouldn't be here this morning. But are we willing to move in the new direction that Christ lifts up? People my age have been raised to believe that happiness comes through upward mobility. If I got an education, if I worked hard, if I saved, I would end up not only financially secure but also enormously content. Isn't that the message from childhood? I am not sure any longer that life works out the way society had predicted. More and more people are discovering that "making it" in worldly standards may not be all that it has been portrayed to be. The children's poet Shel Silverstein has written:

I went to find the pot of gold
That's waiting where the rainbow ends
I searched and searched and searched and searched
And then...there it was
It's mine, it's mine, it's mine at last.
What do I search for now?

"My ways are not your ways, saith the Lord." God is calling us to a different way of life. The "upward mobility" offered by society actually may not be all it is cracked up to be. We are going to be infinitely richer if we choose the way of Christ, "downward mobility", giving of ourselves as he gave of himself.

Do we agree with this transformation of values? I'm not talking about mere lip service. Do we agree that living out the Beatitudes and the rest of the Sermon on the Mount, beginning with a partnership with our Maker, is the way to go? Each day we struggle with this question. Some days progress is made, other days we get bogged down in "society's ways." Nevertheless if our heart is in the right place, we are moving in the right direction.

Jesus' words in Luke offer a radical new understanding of what is important in life in terms of justice, in term of relationships, in terms of attitudes and actions. I know that many of you want to take more seriously the challenge our Lord gave to us. Maybe this is a week to study the Gospels and see how their story speaks to your life in very concrete ways. Maybe this is the day you really decide to make a greater financial commitment to Christ's ministry or volunteer in the life of the church or seek to fix a broken relationship. Maybe Jesus' words will get you thinking less about how much money you need to get all the things you want and more about spending time with your children. Surely that's a path toward happiness.

A few years ago a church youth group was going to Tinseltown to a movie. They had a choice of films to see: "Prince of Egypt", "Down in the Delta" or "Patch Adams". They chose "Patch", the true story of a man who wanted to bring more humor, more humanness, into the medical profession. At one point he was kicked out of medical school and one of the reasons was that he was "excessively happy." "Excessively happy." Doesn't it say something about a society or system that would frown on such a way of life?

Whatever happened to happiness? The answer is quite simple. It got misplaced when women and men went off on their own and forget their relationship with God.