

The 13 Sunday after Pentecost: Holy Trinity Church: August 19, 2018

Proper 15: Ephesians 5:15-20: *Be Wise! Be Sober! Be Thoughtful!*

Preached

By

The Rev. John E. Higginbotham

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Many people today spend their lives in a desperate search for happiness. Many people in our society are simply bored. They mope around, fantasizing about some secret joy that lies out there somewhere. A young man said to his father as he was leaving home, “I’m looking for adventure, excitement, and beautiful women and don’t try to stop me!” “Who wants to stop you?” said his father. “I’m going with you!”

The ironic thing about seeking such pleasure is how little joy it really brings. In fact those who seek it the hardest are often among the unhappiest of people. If you want an example of this, turn to the first two chapters of Ecclesiastes. In these chapters Solomon, a man celebrated for his wisdom, tells of his search to find happiness. The first words we encounter when we open

his book are these: “Meaningless! Meaningless!” says the Teacher. “Utterly meaningless! Everything is meaningless.” You may remember that a couple of weeks ago I quoted theologian Paul Tillich who said that the great fear of our time is meaninglessness. Well, Solomon was the wisest man of his time and yet he could not make sense of his life. He was not a happy man though he sought diligently for happiness.

First he thought the road to happiness would be found in intellectual pursuits. And who could argue with that? There is a certain nobility in seeking knowledge. We salute people who are the best and the brightest in their field. But that doesn’t mean they are happy and content. Certainly Solomon was not. He writes: *“I have increased in wisdom more than anyone who has ruled over Jerusalem before me, but I learned that this is only a chasing after the wind. For with much wisdom comes much sorrow; the more knowledge, the more grief.”* That’s interesting, don’t you think? *“The more knowledge, the more grief.”* Go figure.

When knowledge and wisdom did not bring him any happiness, Solomon followed an entirely different path and turned to sensual pleasure. He said to himself, *“Come now, I will test you with pleasure to find out what is good.”* But that also proved to be meaningless. *“Laughter,”* he says cynically, *“is madness,*

and what does pleasure accomplish?” Then he tried the path of alcohol. “I tried cheering myself with wine,” he writes. But this also produced frustration, as he notes in Proverbs 1: 20: “*Wine is a mocker and beer a brawler; whoever is led astray by them is not wise.*”

How can that be? All the people in the beer commercials look so happy! But alcohol didn’t do it for King Solomon. Then he turned to more constructive activities. He says: “*I undertook great projects: I built houses for myself and planted vineyards. I made gardens and parks and planted all kinds of fruit trees in them.*” Still Solomon did not find the satisfaction for which his heart hungered. From that Solomon turned to the accumulation of wealth: “*I bought male and female slaves. I also owned more herds and flocks than anyone in Jerusalem before me. I amassed silver and gold for myself, and the treasure of kings and provinces.*” Still he did not find what he was seeking.

Then he tried sex: “*I acquired male and female singers and a harem as well the delights of a man’s heart.*” A thousand wives and concubines still left him unfulfilled. Solomon lived life larger than anyone who came before him: “*I denied myself nothing my eyes desired; I refused my heart no pleasure.*” His pleasure seeking experiments were all eventually summed up in these plaintive words: “*Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them: I kept my*

*heart from no pleasure. My heart took delight in all my labor; yet, when I surveyed all that my hands had done and what I had toiled to achieve, everything was meaningless, a chasing after the wind; nothing was gained under the sun.”*He even reached the point where he wrote later in this same chapter: *“So I hated life. All of it is meaningless. I hated all the things I had toiled for under the sun.”*

What a sad, miserable man. He had everything that life in his time could offer, and he counted it all vanity. Solomon had everything the human heart could desire except one. I’ll let you guess what that was. As I read his litany of despair, I couldn’t help but see many people today who are chasing happiness in a similar fashion, knowledge, alcohol, sensual pleasure, fame, work, accumulation of wealth, power, and sex. “Who wants to stop you?” said the father of the young man leaving home. “I’m going with you!”

St. Paul, in his Letter to the Ephesians, saw the same emptiness in many of the people in his time, even among early Christian believers. And so he wrote: *“Be careful then how you live, not as unwise people but as wise, making the most of the time, because the days are evil. So do not be foolish, but understand what the will of the Lord is. Do not get drunk with wine, for that is debauchery; but be filled with the Spirit, as you sing psalms and hymns and spiritual songs among*

yourselves, singing and making melody to the Lord in your hearts, giving thanks to God the Father at all times and for everything in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ.”

There are two keys that St. Paul gives to us that lead to lasting happiness.

First of all, be smart with your life making the most of every opportunity,

because the days are evil. Therefore do not be foolish, but understand what

the Lord’s will is. Do not get drunk on wine, which leads to debauchery.” I am

not concerned that many of you will be led to debauchery. But alcohol abuse is

still a big problem in our society, especially on college campuses and binge

drinking, and on our roads and highways with those who drive drunk.

Alcohol is the primary factor in many tragic cases of domestic abuse. But

nowadays, it is not only alcohol that is destructive to many lives, but also

opioids, gambling, gluttony, sex and many other forms of addiction. “Be very

careful how you live.” says St. Paul.

That’s simply good advice. And it could be applied to substances that we put

into our bodies or a host of other unwise situations in which we might place

ourselves. In other words, don’t be stupid! There are many people today

involved in risky behaviors that are dangerous to their health, dangerous to

their marriages, dangerous to their reputation in the community. Some are dangerous to their immortal soul.

So my sisters and brothers, be very careful how you live. It may seem as obvious as the nose on your face, but I tell you that there is a difference between right and wrong. Of course there is. And every sensible person knows it's true. If it is in any way hurtful to you or someone else, it is wrong. If it prevents you from fulfilling your potential as a disciple of Jesus Christ, then keep your distance. If it causes you to feel ashamed as you look in the mirror, stay away. Don't do anything dumb. Of course, all of us know there is something within our very nature that makes us prone to doing that which is wrong or continue doing things that are wrong and then expecting a different outcome.

We don't use the word sin very much anymore, and yet our basic nature hasn't changed since the time of Adam. Suffice it to say, Don't do anything stupid. If something smells wrong, it usually is. Then Paul writes, "Instead, be filled with the Holy Spirit, speaking to one another with psalms, hymns, and songs from the Spirit. Sing and make music from your heart to the Lord, always giving thanks to God the Father for everything, in the name of our Lord Jesus Christ."

Can you imagine a more wholesome approach to life than the one Paul pictures for us here? I love watching singers and musicians like the choir, Spencer, Jude, Carolyn, Nick, Dave who love what they are doing. I love watching our children when they sing a song of faith here in church. Paul is describing people who are joyfully singing from their hearts. Why? It is because they are filled with a sense of gratitude for all the blessings of God.

Some of you at Christmas time will go to Netflix and pull up the classic heartwarming movie starring Bing Crosby and Danny Kaye, *White Christmas*.

In that delightful motion picture Bing Crosby introduced another Irving Berlin song besides *White Christmas* that has touched many people over the years. It goes something like this: “When I am troubled and cannot sleep, I count my blessings instead of sheep, and I fall asleep counting my blessings.”

That is still the best formula I know of for a good night’s sleep. It sounds trite, I know. But the happiest people I know are people who are filled with gratitude. It doesn’t mean they are materially blessed, or their health is exceptional or that their children are straight ‘A’ students and captains of the football team. It simply means that they have learned to count the blessings they do have and have learned to say, “Thank you.” G. K. Chesterton once wrote: “The test of all happiness is gratitude.” He is right.

So here is our challenge for this week and for the rest of our lives. Let's live our lives with an attitude of gratitude. Be wise. Be sober. Be thoughtful. Solomon experienced every earthly pleasure, yet something was missing from his life. He was a miserable man. Have you guessed what it was that was missing from his life? He had never learned to say, "Thank you." Even though he had a mountain of what other people would count as blessings, he didn't have what he really needed most, he did not possess a grateful heart. I hope you're not making the same mistake. Be wise. Be sober. Be thoughtful. Be grateful! AMEN.