

The 6th Sunday after Epiphany: Holy Trinity Church: February 17, 2019

Luke 6: 17-26:

What would it take to make you happy, I mean really happy?

Preached

By

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

Who do you think is happier? Just ask people who have won the lottery or people who have become paralyzed after an accident? You may be surprised at the answer. I read a study on happiness in a book by Mark Reklau in his book, *Destination Happiness*. The following is his conclusion. Yes, the lottery winners were very happy, but not for very long. After six months they went back to their previous levels of happiness. On the other hand, the accident victims were sad, but surprisingly after six months, they also went back to their previous levels of happiness.” Think about that for a moment. Six months later both groups, those who had won the lottery and those who had

an accident and were paralyzed, had returned to their previous state of happiness. I don't know what that says to you, but it says to me that happiness is an inside job. Our circumstances don't determine how satisfied we are with our lives. Something else, on the inside, makes all the difference.

You and I count as part of our heritage the blessings of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. But what is happiness? Is happiness something that can be obtained by pursuing it? Is it a product of circumstance or surroundings? Is it to be equated with money in the bank, a diploma on the wall, the respect of one's friends and neighbors? Or does it depend on something else, something entirely different? Think for a moment: What would it take to make you happy, I mean really happy?

Jesus talked about happiness, but not in the same way you or I would talk about it. In fact, he turned our understanding of happiness upside down. In the Sermon on the Mount, for example, he made some unique and unusual statements about happiness which we know as the Beatitudes. Luke, in his Gospel, gives us a condensed version of some of those stirring statements:

Happy are you who are poor, for yours is the kingdom of God.

Happy are you who hunger now, for you will be satisfied.

Happy are you who weep now, for you will laugh.

Happy are you when people hate you, when they exclude you and insult you and reject your name as evil, because of the Son of Man. Rejoice in that day and leap for joy, because great is your reward in heaven. For that is how their ancestors treated the prophets. Happy are the poor? Happy are the hungry? Happy are those who weep?

Most of us are more comfortable with the word “blessed” than the word “happy” in these circumstances. But the Greek word *makarios*, which most translators of the Bible translate as “blessed,” can also, be translated as “happy.” That may disturb some of us. We could see how Mother Teresa, working with dying people in the wretched slums of Calcutta, could be blessed, but happy? And yet people who knew her most intimately claimed that she radiated happiness.

In fact, many authors who have studied the pursuit of happiness have observed that the happiest people on earth are not those who pursue happiness, but those who seek God and serve others.

Many of you remember Dr. Norman Vincent Peale and his *Power of Positive Thinking*. Late in his life, Dr. Peale wrote some words that I believe deserve a

wide audience. Listen to his words quite closely. He writes, “I have discovered that the most optimistic people are the most Christian people in their attitudes. Now, I’ve got to qualify that a little bit. I have seen lay people, priests, bishops, archbishops, and so on, up and down the hierarchy who weren’t optimistic, who thought everything was going bad. You see, there are different ways of being a Christian.

Peale tells this story in his book, “A minister in London told me about a man who never would go inside a church. But he would hang around in the vestibule. And when the ushers went away, he would open the door just a crack so he could listen. But he would never venture further than the vestibule. Well,” Dr. Peale continues, “there are many who physically have got past the vestibule, but, mentally, they’re still listening through a crack. They’re only getting a tiny bit, a faint suggestion of the Gospel.

“If you take the whole of Christianity,” Dr. Peale continued, “and really give yourself to it and really accept it, you are going to become so happy, so enthusiastic, and so optimistic, that life will be altogether different for you. Then you will walk in the newness of life when you have absorbed the quality, the essence, the depth and the height, the glory and the power of Christianity.

So my sisters and brothers, let go of that gloom, let go of that depression, let go of that discouragement, let go of that weakness that is a thorn in your side, let go of that sense of failure and shame that you have carried since you were a kid. Get yourself with Jesus really, personally. Go to Him, pray to Him, and tell Him you want to live with Him, tell Him you want to be guided in your life by Him. Tell Him, you love him. And I will guarantee, on the basis of everything I have seen happen in my priestly ministry, that you will become optimistic; you will become victorious; you will have peace in your heart; you will love people even when they are not so lovable; you will feel good physically and emotionally and spiritually. You will have a wonderful life, my sisters and brothers.

You may agree with that or not, but I believe Dr. Peale was on to something-- something that the world just doesn't get. Happiness isn't something that happens to you on the outside, but something that happens on the inside.

In the first chapter of 1 Corinthians, St. Paul says that the wisdom of God shows the world's wisdom to be foolishness. No clearer statement of this principle is found in the Scriptures than in Jesus' statements about happiness. They turn the world's value systems upside down. Happiness or blessedness is not found in wealth or power or pleasure or a full belly. Some of the happiest

people on the planet are some of the poorest people on earth. And some of the richest people on earth in terms of material goods are some of the most miserable people on earth.

We can have the most desperate of circumstances and still be happy, according to Jesus. Happiness comes from another source. It is a very curious spiritual principle that the more we have, the more we demand out of life. So often it is the person who appears to be blessed, with all the external trappings of the good life, who is so easily miffed at God, while the person who has very little feels a much greater sense of gratitude for life's little joys and pleasures.

This is not to say that in order to find happiness, we need to give away everything we possess. That might help or it might be the worst thing we could possibly do. It might fill us with so much resentment, or even worse, with so much self-righteous pride that we would be intolerable. It is to say, however, that some of us have our values all out of whack. That is why we are so miserable. There are only two sources of happiness in this entire world. One is a right relationship with God. The other is a right relationship with our fellow human beings. Everything else is extraneous. Poverty or wealth, handicap or health; surrounded by loved ones or weeping beside a lonely grave. We can still have a well spring of joy within, if we understand the source of happiness.

Happiness is not dependent upon circumstances but on an inner certainty that we are loved, accepted; and that we belong to God. How sad it is to see so many people go through life without discovering this essential principle that happiness comes only from a right relationship with God and with others.

Just think about this, for nearly two thousand years the Christian world has been holding in its hands the complete answer to its restless and fruitless yearnings. Here rests the blueprint for successful human life with optimism, hope, psychological health, and contentment. This is why so many people today are unhappy. It is why suicides are growing among both young people and older people alike. It is one of the reasons for all kinds of addiction. We have bought into the notion that happiness comes by being surrounded with pretty things.

The adage that money cannot buy happiness has been affirmed time after time. According to scientific studies, once our basic needs are met shelter, food, and basic education income makes little difference in our levels of happiness, except in extreme situations.

Even celebrities are beginning to recognize that. Late-night talk show host, David Letterman, was quoted recently in the *New York Times*. Here is what he had to say: “I’m a person who spends a great deal of his time wondering

why he's not happier. I have found that the only thing that does bring me happiness is doing something good for somebody who is incapable of doing it for themselves." That's David Letterman, but it sounds a lot like Jesus.

Here is the challenge for our upcoming week and for the rest of your life, from the Beatitudes in the form of a prayer: Dear God, Thank you for letting me visit. I had a wonderful time. Is that what you would like to say when you come to the end of your life? Dear God, Thanks for letting me visit. I had a wonderful time. You can, you know. You can give your life to Christ and look for people you can serve. You will find a secret to life very few people ever find. You will have found the road to happiness. When you rest eternal in the loving arms of Jesus, You will be able to say, Dear God, Thank you for letting me visit. I had a wonderful time. AMEN.