

## **ARE YOU HAPPY NOW?**

Sermon Preached by Jon M. Walton

February 11, 2007

Scripture: Psalm 1; Luke 6:17-26

Our own Malcolm Ritter, science writer for the Associated Press, writes in an article published this past November, a report on recent scientific research into happiness.<sup>1</sup> It's a fascinating description of an elusive human emotion. In a German study that followed thousands of people over a seventeen year period, the set point, the general happiness level of a quarter of those studied changed significantly during that time, and a tenth improved by three points or more in a ten point scale.

Some happiness studies showed the effect of specific life events. Serious disability, divorce, widowhood, and getting laid off cast long lasting shadows on the lives of those who experienced them. The evidence about the boost from getting married, on the other hand, seemed to dissipate after about two years. And surprisingly, rearing children takes its toll on marital satisfaction. In fact, one Harvard scientist says that "Parents gain in satisfaction as their kids leave home. "Despite what we read in the popular press," writes Daniel Gilbert, "the only known symptom of 'empty nest syndrome' is increased smiling."

The research is mixed as to whether money can make you happy. As Andrew Oswald of the University of Warwick in England has said, "People exaggerate how much happiness is bought by an extra few thousand. The quality of relationships has a far bigger effect than quite large rises in salary. It's much better advice, if you're looking for happiness in life, to try to find the right husband or wife rather than trying to double your salary."

All of that scientific research is helpful, but have you considered that happiness is a quality about which the scriptures have something to say. The first of all the Psalms starts by speaking of happiness,

Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night.

Go through all of the self-help books up the street at Barnes and Noble and you will likely not run into that advice. Exercise, meditation, yoga, painting, jogging, dieting programs, Dr. Phil, Dr. Laura, Dr. Ruth... they all have suggestions about how to find happiness. But none of them will likely say, "Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread."

As Dana Garvey's character, Church Lady, would say, "Isn't that special?" Just the sort of thing you would hear in church. A glib equation of morality and happiness.

It would be nice if life were that simple. "Keep your skirts clean, don't think impure thoughts, and keep your hands to yourself." Nicely packaged aphorisms telling us how to live a happy life. Sounds pretty dull.

James Mays, the Old Testament commentator says, "Who is this fellow who draws about him the skirts of his own righteousness, carefully avoids the contamination

of sinners, and spends all this time gloating in the law? From the moment we hear of him we do not like him.”<sup>2</sup> And Will Willimon, preaching at the Duke University Chapel said, “Here is someone whom you would not want for a roommate. Here is someone whom your mother might pick for your roommate. But even your mother wouldn’t want to live next door to the person who wrote Psalm 1.”<sup>3</sup>

But let’s don’t be too harsh in our judgment. Even the prude has a touch of the truth in him.

The psalmist helps us understand what makes us happy by pointing to what makes for unhappiness. The unhappy are those who sit in the seat of scoffers.

And what’s wrong with that? A little cynicism now and then can’t be that bad. Satire and hyperbole is, after all, the essence of humor. But cynicism with a sneer is not. Scoffing, in the sense that the psalmist uses it, is mocking and devaluing the very things that would make us whole. According to my friend Patrick Willson, pastor of the Williamsburg, Virginia Presbyterian Church:

Cynicism, is antithetical to happiness because it refuses to admit the possibility of heart-rending joy. The opposite of happiness is not unhappiness; unhappiness by its very brokenness yearns for happiness. Cynicism, on the other hand, has not only given up on happiness but insists that everyone else give up as well. Cynicism assumes there is nothing more to learn, nothing more to know, nothing more to transform our lives. ...It fouls the wells from which we all drink; it poisons the fields meant for our nourishment.

There was a Far Side cartoon once which depicted two anthropologists peeking through the bushes at natives dancing and making offerings to an enormous stone edifice carved out to spell the word “NOTHING.” Observing their rites, one anthropologist turns to the other to ask, “Is NOTHING sacred?”

For the scoffer, nothing is sacred. Nothing is holy, nothing connects to the artery that leads to the heart of meaning and faith and what is transcendent. Nothing matters, nothing is treasured, nothing is at the center of life. Life to the scoffer is, as Henry Ford said, “just one damned thing after another.”

In contrast, the psalmist says, “Happy is the one whose delight is in the instruction of the Lord, and on God’s instruction they meditate day and night.”<sup>4</sup> I say “instruction” rather than law, because I want to wean you away from the thought of a law library or the first five books of the bible, the Torah. I want you to think not only of the Bible but also of the lessons that God teaches us in daily life as well, the experience we have of God present in the moment, the “aha” experiences in which we say, “Surely the Lord was in this place and I did not know it.”

Because for the psalmist what we see and hear and experience in life are lessons that God is teaching us, and our response is wonder, joy, thankfulness, amazement, as we see the world alive with God. It moves us to worship, to fall on our knees with slack jawed wonder and lift our voices to God, whatever the experience in life. In a word, the psalmist wants us to learn how to sing.

The first psalm is put in the front of the Bible's hymnbook because of all the hymns contained there, it sets the tone for everything that follows.

And what amazing psalms and songs they are, full of the life of everyday experience, with all of their praise of God, and complaint, and questioning, and joy, and comfort in time of sorrow and need. Just think of the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm, "The Lord is my shepherd, ...even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death I will fear no evil." Or the 51<sup>st</sup> psalm, "Have mercy on me, O God, according to your steadfast love; according to your abundant mercy blot out my transgressions."

Or what about the confidence of the 46<sup>th</sup> psalm, "God is our refuge and strength, a very present help in trouble." Or the joyful exuberance of the 47<sup>th</sup> psalm, "Clap your hands all you peoples, shout to God with loud songs of joy."

The 74<sup>th</sup> psalm, "O God, why do you cast us off forever? Why does your anger smoke against the sheep of your pasture?"

And then there is the frustration and prophetic truth spoken in the 33<sup>rd</sup> psalm, "A king is not saved by his great army, a warrior is not delivered by his great strength. The war horse is a vain hope for victory, and by its great might it cannot save."

And then there's that anguished and violent 137<sup>th</sup> psalm, not the best moment in the Bible, which says with furious rage, "O daughter of Babylon, you destroyer... Happy shall they be who take your little ones and dash them against the rock."

The last psalm, the 150<sup>th</sup> is the bookend at the other side of the 1<sup>st</sup>. It points to the whole world and to all of human experience and asks us to embrace the whole blessed, cursed, lovable, despicable, wonderful, confusing, glorious experience that life is.

Praise the Lord! [the psalmist concludes.] Praise God in the sanctuary; praise  
God in the mighty firmament!  
Praise God for mighty deeds; praise God according to God's surpassing  
greatness!

Praise God with trumpet sound;  
Praise God with lute and harp!  
Praise God with tambourine and dance;  
Praise God with strings and pipe!  
Praise God with cymbals; ...loud crashing cymbals!  
Let everything that breathes praise the Lord!  
Praise the Lord!

Patrick Willson writes, "For the psalmist, happiness has to do with singing these songs, praying these prayers, howling these laments, and allowing them to shape our living."<sup>5</sup>

The first psalm sets the stage for the hymnbook of life, and gives us a song to sing in every season of our days, it gives us a tune to whistle when we are ecstatically joyful, the blues to sing when our hearts are shattered in a thousand pieces, a song of courage when we are so frozen with fear we are afraid to put one foot in front of another, it gives us a ballad to sing when we are in love, a ditty when we feel flighty, a solo when our nation is awry, and an anthem to offer when everything about us points us to God.

The psalms are the juicy, fleshy, human, earthy, songs that capture the stories of our experience and offer them back to God in prayer, sometimes with rage, sometimes with thanksgiving, sometimes with fear, and sometimes with faith.

The beautiful thing assumed throughout the psalms is that there is Someone who loves to hear us sing. Someone to whom we can sing who is always glad to hear our voice. Like a mother who knows that her child can't carry a tune in a bucket but who encourages her little one to sing nonetheless, because she knows that as shrill as the notes may be and as off the mark as the sounds that are produced, there are songs in that little heart that need to be given voice and heard.

We have a school for autistic children in this church, one of the better ministries we have that reaches out to the whole community. The children who come here are from every walk of life, but all of them are in need. They come in through the main lobby every morning full of life and spirit, and they are loud, very, very loud.

Sometimes a child will have a bad day upstairs, and feel very bad. The standard operating procedure is to bring the child down to the lobby and let him or her work things out, which usually involves a lot of crying, tantrum, and yelling. There are days when some of the children feel tortured, but of course the torture is inside, in their heart and in their head.

They howl and scream and cry just outside my office, and usually when I am working on a sensitive matter, counseling someone, or carrying out the business of the day. It's hard to concentrate. But just when I am ready to go out to complain about the noise, I stop and catch myself and remember that these are the children of God, beautiful gifts in our midst, little ones who reminds us of the frightened person inside all of us; the one who wants to cry out sometimes in fear or rage or just be heard. Theirs are the voice God longs to hear, no matter how shrill the cry, even when the singing is off key, even when the lament howls with hurt, or when the sighing comes from the depth of their being. No, that's especially when God wants to hear from us, when the sighing is from the depth of our being.

I have always suspected that we don't get to know God as intimately by memorizing the creeds or studying the theological books or reciting the catechisms as by speaking honestly of who we are before God, whatever we have to bring, at whatever time in life. Happiness is knowing that your life is a song God loves to hear being sung, in fact it is a song God joins in singing.

The truth the psalmist wants us to know as we open the songbook of the Bible is that this is a collection of our songs, that in singing these songs we are singing our life with all its prayers and laments and howls and rages and thanksgivings.

Of course the only problem is that happiness is such a passing thing, it comes and goes, like the Spirit.

Jane Kenyon, the poet, writes of that elusive way of happiness and how we may find it from time to time if we will only open our eyes to the world around us and see God right there. Kenyon writes,<sup>6</sup>

There's just no accounting for happiness,  
or the way it turns up like a prodigal  
who comes back to the dust at your feet  
having squandered a fortune far away.

And how can you not forgive?  
You make a feast in honor of what  
was lost, and take from its place the finest  
garment, which you saved for an occasion  
you could not imagine, and you weep night and day  
to know that you were not abandoned,  
that happiness saved its most extreme form  
for you alone.

No, happiness is the uncle you never  
knew about, who flies a single-engine plane  
onto the grassy landing strip, hitchhikes  
into town, and inquires at every door  
until he finds you asleep midafternoon  
as you so often are during the unmerciful  
hours of your despair.

It comes to the monk in his cell.  
It comes to the woman sweeping the street  
with a birch broom, to the child  
whose mother has passed out from drink.  
It comes to the lover, to the dog chewing  
a sock, to the pusher, to the basket maker,  
and to the clerk stacking cans of carrots  
in the night.  
It even comes to the boulder  
in the perpetual shade of pine barrens,  
to rain falling on the open sea,  
to the wineglass, weary of holding wine.

Happiness is such an elusive thing, but if we pay attention, we may just see it coming, or at least know it when it is there, because in it we see the presence of God in the present moment, and discover there what God is showing us.

Happiness is opening your eyes and seeing that the place where you are is the place, perchance, God is.

Happy, then, is the one who delights and meditates on what God is revealing day and night. So, in the end as in the beginning,

Praise the Lord! Praise God in the sanctuary; praise God in the mighty  
firmament!

Praise God according to God's surpassing greatness.

Let everything that breathes praise the Lord. Praise the Lord.

© Copyright Jon M. Walton, 2007.

---

<sup>1</sup> Malcolm Ritter, “Don’t Worry, Be Happier: Researchers Seek Routes to Happier Life.” New York: November, 2006.

<sup>2</sup> James Mays, **Preaching and Teaching**, p. 161.

<sup>3</sup> Quoted in J. Clinton McCann, Jr., and James C. Howell, **Preaching the Psalms** (Nashville, Abingdon: 2001) p. 91.

<sup>4</sup> I have substituted “instruction” for “law” to capture more of the original meaning.

<sup>5</sup> I quote Patrick’s splendid Moveable Feast paper offered at the gathering of the Feast in Tuscaloosa, Alabama this January, 2007. The paper is on this text and is unpublished. I have also borrowed liberally from some of Patrick’s insights in other parts of this sermon which are not noted, but which in some cases are phrasings used in his paper.

<sup>6</sup> **The Breath of Parted Lips: Voices From the Robert Frost Place by Sidney Lea.** (Franconia, New Hampshire: CavanKerry Press, 2001).