

Happiness

A sermon taken from Matthew 5. 1-12, and preached on January 30, 2011 at
Providence United Methodist Church in Charlotte, North Carolina
by Dr. Ken Carter.

In the dead of winter it helps to think about summer, right? Last summer Pam and I enjoyed a few days in New England. Good friends from Maine had invited us to stay with them at their cabin beside a pond. It was glorious. Then we drove down to Boston, and spent a few days there. I saw a game at Fenway Park; although I am not a Red Sox fan, it was pretty amazing. Some of you know I am on Facebook---they say people my age get connected to Facebook because they want to see pictures of their children, and it is true---and so on Facebook, I commented that we were in Boston for a few days, that we had just finished lunch at the Union Oyster House, and were walking the Freedom Trail.

I immediately received a text message from one of my best friends in high school. He could not believe that I was there. He lived not far away, he said; we had to get together, he would show us around. Now as close as Scott and I had been in high school, I had not seen him in thirty-five years.

So Pam and I met Scott the next day, at an outdoor café in Harvard Square. It was awkward at first. He probably never imagined that I would have become a minister, and he asked about that--“how did it happen?”. I caught up with him. Since Pam did not share our history it was probably interesting for her to see a side of things that I had not talked very much about. He showed us around Harvard, and then MIT, where he had gone to school. His brother in law teaches there and got us into the Media Labs, where they have invented a number of things---the Smart Car, the Kindle, Guitar Hero. Designed by the architect I.M. Pei, the building is all glass, and it is remarkable. Late in the afternoon he drove us back to our apartment.

In many ways it was an extraordinary day: a surprise reunion; a connection with an old friend; the discovery of a new place; the appreciation for intellect and creativity. And it had all come as a gift. I have asked people all week to think about experiences of happiness. When are you happiest? When have you been happiest? The responses have been amazing: some have been related to places---whenever my feet are in the ocean, one friend said; whenever school is cancelled because of snow, another friend commented. Some talked about simplifying their lives. Some talked about following their children’s pursuits. Some talked about a favorite movie. Some talked about serving. Some talked about particular scenes in movies. Some talked about travel.

Happiness is a hot topic in current conversation and research. One of Oprah’s shows last week was about happiness. Gretchen Rubin’s book, *The Happiness Project*, about how she takes a

year to focus on all of this, will soon become a television show. Why the interest in happiness? Maybe it is New Year's Resolutions---remember those? Or it could be that our lives are constantly in the process of change and we have to figure it out again. Nothing made me happier a few years ago than waiting for a youth symphony concert to begin: one of our daughters played the viola. Or attending high school volleyball matches all over Charlotte: one of our daughters was a middle hitter. But time passes, life changes, and I rarely attend the youth symphony or a volleyball match. So what replaces that? We have to come again and again to the question, "when am I happiest?", because time passes, life changes. And so we look for broader measures of happiness.

Adam Smith, the father of modern economics, was convinced that there was no relation between happiness and wealth. He felt however that people were motivated by the pursuit of happiness (he wrote about all of this in 1776...recall the phrase "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness"), and so we had to believe that the production of wealth would make us happy in order for economies to flourish. This was a delusion, he knew, but it really is the basis for our consumer culture. You really will be happy if you win that Visa Contest and get to go the Super Bowl the rest of your life...or if you win the Lottery, and so on. Maybe not!

Instead of Adam Smith and the next commercial that comes across our television, we might listen to an ancient rabbi, who, it turns out, had a few ideas about happiness too. The Common English Bible is a new translation that some in our congregation have been working with. It translates the Greek word, macarios, blessed in many of our English translations, as happy. While the KJV, 400 years ago this year translated macarios as blessed, the very first English translation, the Tyndale version, 100 years before the KJV, expressed it as "happy".

It is interesting that Jesus begins perhaps his most important teaching, the sermon on the mount, with a series of blessings, or statements about happiness. There are a series of nine beatitudes. Scholars remind us that these are descriptions, not prescriptions. They are not telling us how we have to live; they are pointing out the ways in which the blessed and happy life breaks in upon us. They are not commandments, but promises, not goals to be achieved but gifts.

I could teach or preach a series of sermons on the Beatitudes, and I realize that a few minutes today is not time to do justice to them. The first beatitude has to do with poverty of spirit. What does that mean? Luke recorded the beatitude in a simpler form, blessed are the poor. According to Eduard Schweizer, Jesus "*Probably has in mind people whose outward circumstances force them to look to God for everything, but also to receive from God the gift of the spirit (faith) to look to him for everything*". Eugene Peterson translates this verse in an interesting way: "*You're blessed when you're at the end of your rope. When there is less of you, there is more of God and his rule*".

Unhappiness is a life turned in on itself. Happiness is life turned outward and upward toward a higher power, toward God. Happiness happens not only or always when we are filled,

successful, prospering and winning, but when we are empty, struggling, even ground down. In adversity we discover resources we would have missed otherwise.

I asked you this week about when you had been happiest and why? A friend from another city, who leads a construction business responded in this way:

“In the last couple of years, I’ve found I am most unhappy when I’m focused on myself. Worry, fear and trouble overtake me. My antidote to this downward spiral is to think of others. Prison ministry, working for the homeless, praying for the needs of others lifts me from my focus on self and brings me closer to God. My burdens are then lifted and I am open to feelings of gratitude and happiness for God’s provision.”

This is probably not a lesson he would have chosen...and yet he has discovered happiness. If there are other recurring themes in the Beatitudes, they are the relation between the present and the future and the inner life and the external world. We take a step toward happiness, and often for us it must be a choice, as claim God’s promises for the future. Happy are the people who grieve, for *they will* be made glad...Happy are people who are humble, for *they will inherit* the earth. Jesus is teaching us that happiness is having a vision and hope for the future.

The beatitudes, like much of the Sermon on the Mount (Matthew 5-7), also remind us of the importance of the inner life in relation to the external world. As I listened to some of your responses to the question of happiness and faith, I realized that much of this has to do with taking the time to reflect. One friend shared this:

“Some of the happiest moments of my life happened at sidewalk cafes in Belgium. The happiness was in the simplicity of these moments. Good coffee. Solitude. People watching. Old world. No hurry...I suppose happiness happens for me in those rare moments when things slow down . . . way, way down.”

The world most of us live in is filled with activity, being somewhere at a certain time, meeting a particular goal. So much of our conception of happiness is external: if I look a certain way, if I can hang a particular diploma on my wall, if I can get the presentation just right. I am not disparaging this. But it is not the sum total of who we are, and sometimes our lives become out of balance. And so Jesus teaches us not only to hunger and thirst, but to hunger and thirst for righteousness. To reflect is to see what is all around us, but it is to see in a different way: it is to see with the heart.

When you ask someone to reflect on what has made them happy, you have immediately transitioned into the sphere of the heart. One of the beatitudes reads, simply, **“happy are people who have pure hearts, because they will see God”**. To see God, for a Christian, is about the life to come, to be sure, but it is also about this life. Jesus says, in John 14, **“if you have seen me you have seen the Father”**. To see with the heart is to look for Jesus in everyday life; it is striking that my friend talked about finding happiness, in an economic downturn, in ministries

with the homeless and the imprisoned. We remember Matthew 25, and the dialogue at the Great Judgment: **“When did we see you?”**, they ask Jesus and he responds, **“when you have done it unto the least of these, you have done it unto me.”**

A pure heart is a life that resists the distortions of what is often presented to us as happiness, a pure heart looks beneath the surface. And in the beatitudes we also learn that followers of Jesus will be misunderstood, harassed, insulted, spoken badly of. Happiness is not determined in a focus group or by a popularity contest, Jesus insists. Your reward is in heaven.

As we read the Beatitudes and pray them, we are drawn more deeply toward each other and God. We should not be surprised to discover that the happiest people we know are those who are living this way, and we are happiest when we are living this way....finding comfort in our grief, showing mercy instead of carrying bitterness, making peace instead of retaliating, seeing with the heart, finding our worth not in possessions but in relationships.

I realize there is some risk in preaching a sermon about happiness. Christians tend to be serious, somber, religious people, and we don't often associate all of that with happiness. Or we think of some distortions of the gospel, like positive thinking or possibility thinking that did not have the weight of Christian teaching to anchor them. The bankruptcy of the Crystal Cathedral, this fall, seemed to symbolize all of that. The risk, however, should not prevent us from seeking to connect faith and happiness. Jesus was doing this very thing in the Beatitudes. These nine sayings are a simple and profound meditation on life as connection, discovery and gift.

Later in the Sermon on the Mount Jesus teaches us to pray as children dependent on our heavenly Father. Children are constantly connecting, discovering, receiving life as a gift. I am reminded of the wisdom of the novelist Tom Robbins, who said, “it is never too late to have a happy childhood”.

In meeting my friend Scott that day, I did come away seeing my life from a different perspective. Time passes, life changes. Could it really have been 35 years? And how could I have imagined it happening the way it has, all of it coming as something of a surprise? Going to seminary, meeting Pam, a life in the ministry, the births of two children, traveling around the world, writing books, having the privilege of entering into people's lives at some of the most amazing intersections---weddings, funerals, deaths, births, decisions, frustrations, celebrations.

I have often found myself, even in chaotic, uncertain and challenging times, knowing that I am blessed, and, yes, happy. That day I knew it again.

Sources: Eduard Schweizer, *The Good News According To Matthew*. Shawn Achor, *The Happiness Advantage*. Gretchen Rubin, *The Happiness Project*. Percy Ainsworth, “The Vision of a Clean Heart”, *Weavings*, November/December, 1996. The Common English Bible (www.commonenglishbible.com).