

Finding Happiness in Tough Times

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Pullman, WA
November 1, 2020

Reading: Matthew 5:1-12 (Good News Bible)

We are living in some very difficult circumstances right now. The global pandemic is affecting everyone. The lives of children has been disrupted as they experience virtual schooling and isolation. Parents try to juggle their jobs and the needs of their children. The elderly also feel isolated as they need to take extra precautions. Many families have experienced the death of a loved one. People have lost their jobs or have experienced economic hardship and uncertainty. Businesses struggle and close down. There is a lot of anxiety, stress and pain out there right now.

The nation has convulsed in anger and grief over police brutality and excessive force, racism and unequal treatment toward African American people.

And on top of this, we are on the eve of the most polarized, anxiety-producing, perhaps most important national election in modern history.

How can we deal with all this? In the midst of the chaos, stress and pain, how can we find happiness? Many of us are struggling with this. How can we find the peace and contentment that we yearn for?

Today I started with the famous words of Jesus that are part of what Matthew called “the sermon on the mount.” These sayings in the first part of the sermon are known as “the beatitudes.”

Most of you would recognize these sayings with the word, “blessed.” But I’ve used a translation that has the word, “happy” instead, because to bless means to confer happiness upon someone. But it’s not the kind of happiness we normally think of—a happiness that is externally-based, tied to circumstances, a feeling. Rather it is an internally-based stated of contentment that is deeper than emotion. So maybe that’s why translators avoided the word, “happy.”

There’s this great saying by Marty Babcock that I like.

*Jesus promised only three things if we follow him. That we would be
1) utterly fearless, 2) absurdly happy and 3) always in trouble.*

We often forget that second one. Religion can turn the spiritual journey into such a chore. Religious people can be such a downer sometimes and forget that the whole point is about this deep contentment and absurd happiness that awaits us. Yet the spiritual quest is often not what we expect it to be.

And this morning I want you to take a moment to look at the beatitudes again and see, according to Jesus, what truly happy people look like. Now you may have a picture in your mind about what happy people look like. They have their lives together, maybe. Organized, together, successful, admired by others. Things are working out for them, good health. They have lots of stuff—nice home, nice cars, vacations, summer homes. Imagine happy people.

Now take a look at Jesus' portrait. I bet you that it's quite different from what you imagine. Happy are the *poor in spirit*, those who are ready to give up, at the end of their ropes, depressed, discouraged... Wait a minute! This is not the picture of happiness we had in mind.

Luke's version has Jesus saying, "Happy are *the poor*," the destitute, the hungry, those without possessions, the unemployed, struggling financially, the homeless, the losers. Wait a minute! Do these look like the happy people to you?

Happy are those who mourn, those who weep, and those inconsolable in their grief. How can this be?

Happy are you who are persecuted, who are reviled, hated, excluded and defamed—when people spread evil lies about you.

Wow! If these are the happy ones, I'd hate to see the unhappy ones! This reminds me of that posting in the classifieds: "Missing: Brown dog. Mutt. Blind in one eye. Tail half missing. Torn right ear. Walks with a limp. Answers to the name, 'Lucky.'" Maybe the beatitudes sound ridiculous because we just have the wrong idea of what happiness is. Maybe what we *call* our happiness is really a *chain* that holds us back.

Jesus said that we all already have what we need for happiness, and it does not come through striving and toil, achievement and accomplishment. In fact, those ideas of happiness actually lead us astray.

Jesus said, look at the lilies of the field and the birds of the air. They don't worry. They aren't filled with anxiety. They are happy. They are not held down by the wrong ideas. According to Jesus, the truly wise ones are the animals, the plants and small children. And those who do not understand are adults, religious leaders and successful people. No wonder Jesus got killed!

I find that just about every religious tradition deals with this problem in a similar way. The Buddhist version of the formula goes something like this:

- 1) The world is full of unhappiness.
- 2) The root of unhappiness is attachment.
- 3) The uprooting of unhappiness is dropping of attachments.

What, then, are attachments and how do we drop them? Well, attachments are desires, those things that we want. Now here's where I think that Buddhism has gotten a bad rap. It's not about living without any desire at all, like you're kind of floating on the clouds somewhere. We're not talking about dropping all wants and desires. Rather, attachments are certain kinds of desires that have run amuck. *Attachments are those desires upon which our happiness depends.* Attachments are those *things to which we hook our happiness.* They are those *things we think we need in order to be happy.*

Please hear me. Desire is not always selfish or evil or wrong. We desire may fine things—companionship, sexual intimacy, tenderness, relationships, things required for life. But the problem happens when we hook our happiness to our desires—even our finest ones. Because we all already have what we need for happiness. It was the great Buddhist master, Tilopa, who said, “The problem is not enjoyment; the problem is attachment.”

As the poet, William Blake wrote:

*He who binds to himself a joy
Does the winged life destroy.
But he who kisses the joy as it flies
Lives in eternity's sunrise.*

The happiness that Jesus is talking about is independent from circumstances. Here's the unbelievable part: *You can be full of happiness in the midst of failure, pain, sickness and depravation.* “Don't tell me this!” you might say. “Don't tell me I can find happiness in these circumstances; *tell me how to change the circumstances!*” But if we want true happiness, if we want to live in eternity's sunrise, we don't try to find it in even the best circumstances or bind ourselves to a joy.

As the apostle Paul wrote, there is a peace and contentment that can be found in every circumstance. (2 Thess. 3:16) Because we already have *what we need* for our happiness. We were born with it and will die with it. And when we are in touch with it, when we hook our happiness to this one thing, then we can truly love.

And what is this one thing we have for happiness? Jesus described it as the Kingdom of God we are living in *right now.* It is *the miraculous present moment* in which we can feel *the sacred pulse of life.* It's not yesterday or tomorrow or even in the next minute. It's Now.

You know, sometimes people assume that the opposite of happiness is pain and sadness, but it's not. We often assume that happiness means comfort and absence of pain. But sometimes, in fact, adversity can help people become more compassionate, and lead to greater growth, wisdom and deep happiness.

When we are able to drop our attachments—those circumstances we think we need for happiness—then we can embrace Life in its full spectrum.

What do truly happy people look like? They laugh and cry. Happy are those who weep. They can experience hard times because they are not attached to the good. And because they are unattached they are free to walk the sacred path of love and compassion.

Here are some other identifying marks:

Happy are those who hunger and thirst for justice and righteousness.

Happy are the merciful.

Happy are the pure in heart.

Happy are the peacemakers.

According to Jesus, this is what truly happy people look like, what they do. It is to be open to both joy and sorrow within oneself and within others.