

HAPPINESS

Psalm 1, Matthew 5: 1-12

Happiness. What makes you happy? I'm sure we can all come up with a list of things that make us, or would make us happy. Certainly at the top of the list would be things like relationships, health, having sufficient food, shelter and the means to acquire the basics of life. It's also about success, prosperity, meaningful work and volunteering opportunities. It's also about being appreciated, acknowledged and loved by people in our lives, at home, among friends, with neighbours and at work. And what about achievements and accomplishments? Don't these make us happy, especially as we are able to share them with others who also value them or benefit from them? Absolutely! Our happiness is dependent on how others see us, celebrate us and value us and all we have to offer.

But what about those cases of people who seem to have so much going for them on the outside who are not happy? And what about those people who seem to have so much less of money, health and the external things of life who are yet happy in themselves?

Leo Tolstoy, the great Russian novelist, probably at one time the most famous man in the Russia of the late 1900s, writes about a crisis he had at mid-life. He tells of how he had achieved great success and popularity as a writer and thinker. He was healthy and vigorous with lots of energy. He was happily married and had children. He was highly respected. He was prosperous. And yet, he hit a wall. Why it happened there was no explanation. He fell into a severe depression and his energy was sapped. It seemed to locate itself in the whole question of life's meaning, purpose and value. We're here today and gone tomorrow. What does it all mean?

He also looked around and discerned in a lot of the peasants who worked the land, a certain contentment that he lacked. They had nothing at all of his success, prosperity and fame, and yet they possessed a contentment and happiness that was superior to anything he had known. Tolstoy wanted what they had, but part of it was figuring out what that was exactly. He discerned that it had to do with their faith and the values that came from such faith. But when he looked at the church of his day, all he saw were leaders and a culture religion steeped in the social values of power, wealth, colonial conquest and social respect as providing the formula for happiness.

The peasants, on the other hand, chose simplicity and focused not on what happens to you in life or the cards you've been dealt, but what you make of the life you're given. That's the difference: happiness as dependent on things external to you versus happiness as rooted in what lives and breathes within you. It took Tolstoy 10 years to figure out this difference and emerge out of his depression. 10 years. So what was it Tolstoy discovered more specifically?

For Tolstoy it had to do with rediscovering biblical religion outside the conventional church of his day. And in order to get at something of what Tolstoy discovered let's zero in on our scripture readings. We begin with Psalm 1. Psalm 1 begins the whole collection of psalms and therefore it has to be important. But on the surface it seems pretty simplistic. It's like the world is divided between two kinds of people: the wicked and the righteous. But is there no in between? Isn't life a little more ambiguous than that? Aren't even the most righteous people flawed in some way? And don't some "wicked" people have some goodness in them? And if we are honest about ourselves, wouldn't we have to admit that we have our moments and days and sometimes whole periods of life where we are anything but righteous for all our best efforts? Indeed! Coming to church and worshipping God must begin with truth and honesty. That's why we worship a God of grace and mercy, a God of forgiveness. If we're not looking for some grace, mercy and forgiveness as part of a larger journey toward greater wholeness, why bother with church?

And yet, forgiveness alone is not enough. We also need moral clarity, direction and inspiration to get there. What is the difference between wickedness and righteousness? How do we orient ourselves and prioritize our lives so that righteousness is what we aim for rather than something else? How do we get clear on what righteousness is in a context where there's plenty of wickedness to tempt, confuse and throw us off?

The problem with Psalm 1 is that it's really easy to misread it. It all begins with the first word in the psalm: happy. And even though it tells us straight out that the happy person is the one who avoids the advice of the wicked, the path of sinners, and the seat of scoffers, and instead delights in the law of the Lord, meditating on it day and night, it also describes happy people as being like a well-watered tree that grows beautiful leaves and yield's rich fruit. Happy people "prosper in all they do", we're told. The wicked, on the other hand, fail and fall and are blown away by the wind. God watches over the righteous whereas the destiny of the wicked is to perish. So then, according to this way of reading the psalm, why would I delight in God's law and meditate on it day and night, and why would I avoid wicked sinners and scoffers? Because if I don't follow this way I will not prosper and I will never be happy. I will fail and fall and ultimately perish. Ok, but isn't this, then, just adhering to righteousness out of self-interest? If I'm focusing on becoming a better human being because it will help me prosper, and keep me from perishing, how authentic a motive is that for being better?

Besides, as we know, life is not so straightforward for the righteous or the wicked. How many good people suffer misfortune and injustice? Just think about all those innocent young indigenous children... And how many wicked people succeed, often through their wickedness, and seem to get away with it just fine? Think about all those who abused those children, and us Canadians as a whole? The world is not morally structured as the psalmist appears to believe and God is not in control in any obvious way.

OK, but what if happiness is not the goal of life but righteousness is? And what if success and prosperity are not about external goods but something internal that lives in the heart? In fact, the psalmist uses the word “delight” as the core motive for why the righteous care about God’s law. If you are authentically righteous, you delight in seeking to discern God’s law of right and wrong, rather than see it as a means to something else. You’re not happy because you’ve made happiness your goal. No. You’re happy because righteousness is your goal and you experience delight in pursuing it.

OK. But what if the world around you is bent in an opposite direction? What if righteousness doesn’t pay off and you suffer for it? And what if wickedness is tempting because it makes life a whole lot easier? This is where Jesus takes it a whole lot deeper than psalm 1. Our scripture reading is the opening passage of some core teaching of Jesus known traditionally as his sermon on the mount. Jesus makes a bunch of statements about those who are truly blessed or happy. Externally speaking, though, the people he describes would be anything but blessed or happy. I mean those who are poor in spirit, who mourn, who are meek, who are hungry and thirsty rather than full, and those who are reviled and persecuted... How can Jesus describe them as blessed or happy?

But what if we need to dig deeper to discover some rich spiritual gold here? That’s exactly what Jesus is hoping will happen in his listeners.

Being poor in spirit is not about missing something the world can give you. It’s about being humble and open, in search of something other than money, fame and all those things promised in the world will make you happy. The poor in spirit are searching for something they don’t see in the world as it too often is.

And even as mourning arises out of something sad that has happened in life, those who mourn are those who love, and mourning helps us remember what is most important and valuable in life. Mourning helps us zero in more deeply on what matters.

And the meek are not those who take forcefully, but create space to enjoy the earth only as others can also partake. The meek make space for others rather than claim it for themselves.

And a hunger and thirst for righteousness matters much more than a hunger and thirst for material goods and status that will never make you full no matter how much you have because we’re ultimately made for something else and called to something else.

And being merciful and pure in heart reminds us that cultivating our hearts in and through love and mercy is the only road to genuine happiness.

And being a peacemaker is not about avoiding conflict, but about healing through openness to forgive and creating a safe space to repent, confess and experience a love large enough to house the pain.

Finally, righteousness often pays a steep price in a world where injustice is too often rewarded and truth is buried. Yet eternity is aligned with righteousness. The deeper our hearts are growing in faith, hope and love, the more the comforts and rewards of bending our consciences toward injustice will just make us miserable rather than happy. And even as we may suffer for justice in a society or work environment that is bent on injustice and corruption, there is a deeper groundedness in a faith, hope and love that are bigger than the here and now of evil.

So what about Tolstoy? The sermon on the mount totally transformed his vision. What he learned from Jesus and the peasants is that sometimes the most comfortable life can be the most miserable and meaningless. And sometimes, suffering, especially for justice' sake, can lead to a richer inner fullness, a happiness of a different order, feeding the soul with rich meaning and a larger purpose. In Tolstoy's mature novels, like War and Peace, this inner search for happiness through righteousness in a world full of conflict, suffering and injustice is paramount. You are responsible to something higher than just your appetites and your comfort. You're made for this as a human being. Don't settle for less even if it costs you everything!

OK. But what does justice look like when the injustice is overwhelming? How can we be happy when we're exposed to something profoundly troubling? I know many of you, like me, are absorbing the horrific discovery of hundreds of dead children buried in unmarked graves at a residential school in BC. And this, from what we're being told, may only be the beginning... What does this say about us as a nation? Last Sunday my sermon illustration involved the word "genocide" to describe Canada's treatment of indigenous peoples of this land. This past week's discovery only deepens this judgement.

If we are to internalize a "happiness" or blessedness as Jesus describes it and as Psalm 1 points to it, it can only come by profoundly mourning this atrocity. Over time, it will also become clearer what we need to do to atone, and how we will find our path to healing and reconciliation. We cannot bring back those children or remove the trauma of the survivors and their families. Those children died alone, abused and afraid. Nothing we can do can change that. Only mercy and grace can open up a path to some peace. But happiness can never come by blocking the injustice out. The more difficult path of suffering through it, through the guilt and shame, the repentance, the costly reparation, the tears... This must be our path ahead... and we entrust it all to a larger goodness, a larger justice and a larger love...

Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted...

Blessed are those who hunger and thirst after righteousness, for they will be filled...

Blessed are the pure in heart, for they will see God...

May it be so, O God, may it be so... Amen.