

Salvation as Blessing; Or, 14 Thousand Things to Be Happy About

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I was riding along in my car awhile back listening the N.P.R. and heard of a book recommendation. It was by Barbara Ann Kipfer, and the title was *14 Thousand Things to Be Happy About*. I went out and bought it. It is nothing more than a list of 14 thousand things that make us happy, 612 pages of list! Ms. Kipfer is a lexicographer by profession with a Ph.D. in linguistics. She does research in the study of dictionaries.

It all started when she was in the sixth grade. She started her list in a tiny spiral notebook, which became a larger notebook, then a larger notebook, then many notebooks which are today a personal computer file with over a million word-bytes of word pictures. Things like:

Ticonderoga pencil

Seeing the moon rise

Sweet fresh corn

The “snuggle right in” feeling

The position of your head as you bite into a taco

I

There's something I like about the phrase "to be happy about". You can fake being thankful, but you can't fake happy. If I asked you to make a list of things you were thankful for, the feeling of duty or oughtness might be might creep in, things you are *supposed* to be thankful for. The kind of list you might be asked to write in *church*! But happy?! Happy just *is*!

A Story. Scott was a teenager about 14; his younger sister Cara was 6 or 7. It was Thanksgiving season, and Scott had been given the outrageous homework assignment of listing 100 Thing To Be Thankful For. Adolescence had kicked in with Scott. He had entered what has been affectionately called "the hormone zone", where hormones start hurtling around your body like race cars out of control. These hormones do a number of weird things to the teenage body, including killing off all the enzymes which produce *gratitude*!

All afternoon Scott groused about the assignment. How was he *ever* going to think about 100 things? He was still grouching when he came to the supper table. The family tried to reverse his mood by saying cheerfully: "Go get a pencil and paper, and we'll help you". He got the pencil and paper, but his mood was not about to change. (In teenage years feelings are so strong they leave *stains*!) Cara

broke the downward spiral. “How about paper?” she chimed out. “What?!” said Scott. Cara said, “Yes, paper, like the paper you write on. You like writing notes in class to friends, don’t you?” “O.K.,” said Scott, and he wrote down “paper”. Then she began free associating: “And how about the *pencil* that writes on the paper, and the *trees* that make pencils and paper, and *leaves* that feed the trees and turn colors in the fall, and the *rain* that feeds the trees, and roofs that keep out the rain?” Soon the whole family was giggling, and Scott was writing as fast as he could. The father’s last memory was of Cara going into the kitchen with her dishes saying “What about *salad dressing*?!” And Scott following behind with paper and pencil saying, “Wait up!”

Things to be happy about. What would you put on your list of 14 thousand? I bet for some of you one might be Crayola crayons—which is why all of you have been given brand new Crayola crayons today. Now take yours and close you eyes and hold it to your nose and *smell* it! I bet we are the only congregation in America sniffing crayons in church today!

Does the smell of crayons bring forth any memories in you? Brain scientists say that smell unlocks many of our deepest and dearest memories. (By the way, one scientific study says that in our American culture the three most recognizable smells are: 1) coffee; 2) peanut butter; and 3) Crayola crayons.)

Do you remember your first box of Crayola crayons? Were they the thin ones or the thick ones? Do you remember shopping for them before every school year? They represented the happiness of a fresh new start, a clean slate for the year. (It was also a clean slate and fresh start for the teachers too!)

But I've supplied the crayons not just so you could *smell* them but so you could *use* them! Start making your list of 14 thousand things on the extra paper we've supplied. I bet some of them have already started popping into your mind. Use your crayons to write down things that make you happy, or if you prefer to *draw* them. Our children who have joined us have been doing this in Sunday School. They may want to show you theirs. And you may want to share yours with them.

One rule: write or draw only those things you wouldn't mind if your mother saw it. You can *think* anything, but for today, just the things your mother could see.

II

Here are a few more things on Barbara Kipfer's list:

A toddler's vocabulary

Eight hours of sleep

Eating Oreos then showing people your teeth

Tree houses

Sexy music

Labradors that think they are lap dogs

Street musicians

Silly putty

Noodle, Texas

Sesame Street

Six-ounce Coke bottles

Cuddling

What are some of the ones you have started putting down? Now I'm going to go into the congregation and let you add to the sermon....

III

A final biblical/theological word. Old Testament theologian Claus Westermann made for me an illuminating distinction. He said that in the Old Testament salvation came in two forms: Salvation as Deliverance and Salvation as Blessing.¹

Salvation as *Deliverance* has to do with the mighty acts of God, big dramatic acts of rescue from slavery, sin, evil and death, like the Exodus from slavery in Egypt and “coming home” from Exile in Babylon.

But there is also Salvation as *Blessing*: the ordinary, everyday blessings of life: Getting married, getting well after sickness, babies, grandchildren, our children, abundance, enough to eat, a home, a family, a community. Like hugs when you come to church.

Our Psalm for today, Psalm 148 was filled with Salvation as Blessing. And Jesus talked about joy as a manifestation of salvation: “These things I have spoken that you may have joy, and that your joy may be full” (John 15:11), and from John 10:10: “I came that you may have life and have it abundantly.”

I think theologians over the years have focused on Salvation as Deliverance, and virtually ignored Salvation as Blessing. The fact that most of our theologians have been, up until present times, *male*, may have something to do with it.

Salvation literally means “wholeness”, those everyday miracles that bring joy, well-being, and yes, that make us happy.

1) Claus Westermann, *Blessing In the Bible and the Life of the Church* (Philadelphia: John Knox Press, 1978).