

THE FIRST PRESBYTERIAN PULPIT

PURSUED BY KINDNESS

A sermon preached on April 13, 2008 by the Rev. Dr. Jeffrey S. O'Neill

Psalm 23 [translation by Robert Alter, *The Book of Psalms*, Norton, 2007]
The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want. In grass meadows He makes me lie down, by quiet waters guides me. My life He brings back. He leads me on pathways of justice for His name's sake. Though I walk in the vale of death's shadow, I fear no harm, for You are with me. Your rod and Your staff – it is they that console me. You set out a table before me in the face of my foes. You moisten my head with oil, my cup overflows. Let but goodness and kindness pursue me all the days of my life. And I shall dwell in the house of the Lord for many long days.

Are you happy? Can you imagine being happier? Well, who couldn't imagine a higher state of euphoria than sitting in church for an hour, I suppose. I won't make you admit that...just enjoy it quietly.

What makes you happy? What erodes or diminishes happiness? Emotional states come and go, ebb and flow, rise and fall. According to Daniel Gilbert, a professor of psychology at Harvard, we all tend to be very poor at predicting what will or won't make us happy. He and several colleagues have developed studies on *affective prediction* – that is, our ability to suppose accurately what actions, behaviors, changes of circumstance, etc. that will bring about a desired emotional state. A New York Times report says, "The problem...is that we falter when it comes to imagining how we will feel about something in the future. ...We can accurately predict that we'd rather be stuck in Montauk than in a Midtown elevator...(but) we overestimate the intensity and the duration of our emotional reactions...to future events. We might believe that a new BMW will make life perfect. But it will almost certainly be less exciting than we anticipated; nor will it excite us for as long as predicted. ...Would a 20% raise or winning the lottery result in a contented life? You may predict it will, but almost surely it won't turn out that way. And a new plasma television? You may have high hopes, but the impact bias suggests that it will almost certainly be less cool, and in a shorter time, than you imagine." A colleague of Gilbert's, Dan Wilson, says, "We don't realize how quickly we will adapt to a pleasurable event and make it the backdrop of our

lives. When any event occurs to us, we make it ordinary. And through becoming ordinary, we lose our pleasure.”

Thomas Jefferson and his founding father colleagues wrote into the Declaration of Independence the right to “life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.” Happiness may be, as the document says, an *unalienable* right, but that doesn’t mean we know what exactly what it is or how we are to get it. Philosophers and poets have long compared the pursuit of happiness to that of chasing an elusive butterfly, which – if caught – ends up pinned on a display and destroyed. The Stoic Epictetus wrote, “Would you increase a man’s happiness? Then, do not satisfy his wants, but take away from his desires.”

An unsolicited magazine arrived in my mail this week. It was filled with ads and articles about expensive watches, designer clothing, luxurious automobiles, and even a \$1400 Swiss Army knife. As the publisher enthused in his preface, the magazine was “a reminder of the tremendous rewards and unique access...and experiences we value.” I was still unclear about who this “we” was, as he promised me “a guided tour of the finest whiskeys, ...an insider’s guide for gaining admission to the top private clubs, ...a unique perspective on classic car clubs, ...what’s new in premium shaving gear, and (a look) at the new lightweight jets that are in extraordinary demand among high-end consumers.” The magazine was all about what his idea of happiness was, but somehow I got the idea that Epictetus would not approve.

It’s interesting to me how little scripture has to say about happiness. At least the use of the word is rare. In fact, in the New Revised Standard Version – the version you have sitting before you in the pew racks – the word appears only once, and in Lamentations of all places [3:17]: “My soul is bereft of peace; I have forgotten what *happiness* is.”

English translators, trying to be faithful to the original intent of scripture’s authors who wrote in Ancient Hebrew and common Greek, find *happiness* a woefully inadequate word to express the quality of thought and feeling to be expressed. Happiness, though a driving force in our modern lives, seemed not to be uppermost among our spiritual ancestors. For them *joy* was the issue, demonstrated by its appearing 219 times in English translation, and *rejoice* and related forms about 175 times.

We may not be conceptually wired to discern the difference between *joy* and *happiness*. Whether winning a billion dollars in the Powerball lottery brings the winner “happiness” or brings them “joy,” it’s a distinction without a difference to us who long to be the guy with the winning ticket. A friend to me one day she was feeling depressed and was going out to engage in “some retail therapy,” by which she

meant shopping. There's nothing like tokens of affluence surrounding us to bring us to what we think is happiness. Does it bring us *joy*?

There's nothing like conspicuous consumption on the part of the rich to lead us to believe that because they are wealthy they must be happy. There's even a burgeoning form of religion – I cannot bring myself to call it Christianity – that equates God's blessing with wealth. The so-called *Word of Faith* movement – sometimes referred to as the *prosperity gospel* – preaches that since God is rich, all of God's believers are meant to be rich, too. Sarah Posner, author of *God's Profits* [that's spelled "p-r-o-f-i-t-s"], writes of preachers like Benny Hinn, T. D Jakes, Joel Osteen, Joyce Meyer, Kenneth Copeland and many others whose own lavish lifestyles reflect their core message to millions of followers: see how rich God has made me? all this can be yours!

Posner quotes Angie and Mike, a couple from Michigan, who exemplify the attitudes of the prosperity gospel: "If a Christian is a poor, desperate-type person, who would want to be a Christian? ...Christ himself did not come on this earth and be poor.... He was a wealthy man."

Set aside for a moment their abysmal ignorance about the Bible, Jesus' life and ministry, and two thousand years of the church's witness. Forget the writings of the prophets which excoriated the wealthy and powerful of their day for their obscene self-concern and their abandonment of social responsibility. Rewrite the Lord's Prayer and pray "give us this day our daily caviar" if you have to, but here's the thing: none of this will make you happy; none of this will bring you joy; none of this chasing after wind will solve the essential dilemmas of your life. Indeed, it could destroy you, and at the very least it will distort your essential humanity and cut you off from the things that are durable, that sustain, and that feed the soul.

Americans, I suppose, are uniquely susceptible to the sort of lie this type of religion promotes. We pride ourselves on our material prosperity. We equate wealth with power. We are fascinated by celebrity, which equates with wealth, which equates with the kind of secret knowledge we all crave to unlock the door to riches and happiness. But what does this have to do with our faith? Where do we make the connection between our faith and our possessions?

A century ago 80% of the world's Christians lived in Europe and North America. Today, 70% of the world's Christians live in Africa, Asia, and Latin America. Let's ask ourselves how this relates to what Christianity is all about. Let's ask what we could learn from the parts of the world where Christianity is on the rise rather than declining as it is in our part of the world. Historian Dana Robert observes that, "The average Christian in the world today...is a woman from Africa or Latin

America. Her family has little money. Her husband farms, and he scrounges up short-term cash jobs when he can. She tries to sell a few things at market. The children haven't had their shots, and they get sick. She struggles to keep them in school, where there are no textbooks. The political situation is fragile, and the national government doesn't get much done, while local officials demand bribes. Our sister reads her Bible, and its accounts of famine, plagues, poverty, displacement and exile, tyranny, cronyism, and corruption – which seem distant to most of us in the global North and West – are immediately relevant to her. The Bible is her book.”

Thomas Aquinas, 13th century philosopher and theologian, teaches a truer happiness. Aquinas starts with the premise that God is good and the cosmos and all that is in it is God's creation and hence an expression of God's goodness. Further, Aquinas argues that the whole of creation is unified – that is, each part of it contributes to the whole of it, and nothing is separate or independent. It is the function of each part to contribute to the flourishing of the rest of creation, and that is the essence of happiness – the participation in the purpose for which we have been created.

Ellen Charry, professor of theology at Princeton, writes: “The key to happiness (from Aquinas' point of view) is...not dependent on feelings or external circumstances, (but) the ability to love well. It is not about how well things are going for us; it is about how well we are going. Happiness of this sort is then quite compatible with sadness and is possible even in the midst of enormous grief. We can always ask ourselves how we can love well no matter what our circumstances.

“Contemporary culture offers us various versions of happiness. We are told that happiness is a feeling, or that happiness is the result of wealth or health, or that it can be attained by having the right product for the right moment or by perfecting one's circumstances so as to build a buffer against ill fortune. None of these visions is the Christian vision of happiness. Instead, happiness is a life nourished by the love and goodness of God that contributes to the flourishing of creation. ...A person who has learned to love well will experience pleasure and satisfaction from being herself – a person built from the loving use of God-given creativity, power, and goodness. When that goodness takes us residence in us we realize that we are the living image of God, and that makes us happy.”

A word, finally, about today's scripture reading from the Psalms. Most of us would say that it is a psalm of contentment, of safety, security, and – yes – happiness, I think. Beginning with a pastoral metaphor of sheep safely grazing and all their needs satisfied, the psalm moves to the human sphere where there is a scene of extravagant provision of food and drink and companionship in amounts

beyond need. In these ways the psalm reflects Aquinas' vision of the integrity of God's creation and our place in it. It is a psalm where we belong, where we can relax and bask in contentment; it is a psalm in which we can be innocent and dull like sheep.

Or is it ...? The traditional translation of the psalm renders vs. 5, "Surely goodness and mercy shall *follow* me all the days of my life...." Robert Alter's more accurate translation changes the dynamic of the psalm from the passive, docile, inert and dim-witted sheep-like mode of contentment into the active, energized, enlivened mode of purposefulness and intention – there is even a hint of aggression in his rendering. "Surely goodness and kindness shall *pursue* me all my life long," it reads. The word at issue is the Ancient Hebrew *radaph*, which means to *pursue*, or *chase*, as in Isaiah 51:1 ["Listen to me, you that *pursue* righteousness, you that seek the LORD. Look to the rock from which you were hewn, and to the quarry from which you were dug."], or – in some places in scripture – it means to *persecute*, as in Jeremiah 20:11 ["But the LORD is with me like a dread warrior; therefore my *persecutors* will stumble, and they will not prevail."].

We spend so much time chasing after dreams of happiness, we fail to realize that all the time it is we who are being chased by grace, kindness, and goodness and all the creative, purposeful qualities of Godliness. We are insistently pursued until the self-concern in us is driven out and replaced by an open-hearted love for God's world, our neighbors, ourselves. The nature of God is to not leave us alone, nor to allow us contentment as long as it is only for ourselves that we are living. It is only when we are living to show forth God's goodness that we will know that God's goodness has overtaken us and finally, at last, we are happy.