

If You're Happy, Do You Know It?

Sunday, May 16, 2021

Psalm 1

Rev. Dr. Chris Keating

Despair often causes us to wonder what it means to be rooted in the presence of God.

The other day I wandered into Quik Trip to buy some milk. Well, maybe I bought a donut, too. But I know that I definitely bought milk. Either way, there was a woman in the line ahead of me who was also buying a few things. After she had paid for her items, she reached into her purse and pulled out a few crumpled bills and purchased lottery tickets. I'm not sure how many she was buying -- \$15, \$20, \$25—I wasn't paying attention. I glanced at the jackpot – it was sizable. Last night it was \$185 million, it was less than that the other day, but still sizable.

I am pretty sure I knew what was racing through her mind. It's the same thought all of us have when we imagine the possibilities of winning a large jackpot, or inheriting a big chunk of money or earning a healthy bonus. "Oh, how happy I will be."

"I'd quit my job," "We'd buy a new house, and maybe one at the lake," or "I'd pay off my debts, and all of my kids' debts." There's a couple of you who would say, "I'd build that church of mine a kitchen."

I'd be happy, and I would know it.

Of course, the reality is that it is more common for jackpot winners to end up losing their fortunes than gaining lasting happiness. A year after winning over \$16 million in the Pennsylvania lottery in the 1980s, a man named William Post said he wished he'd never bought the ticket. A former girlfriend had sued him – and won—for a share of his winnings, his brother was arrested for hiring a hit man to kill Post, and the business he had invested in went bankrupt. "I was much happier when I was broke," Post said. He lived the rest of his life on \$450 a month in government assistance until he died in 2006.¹

He never found that happiness. Most of us know that real happiness is not purchased or even earned. But that does not answer the primary question: what brings us happiness? Here we are, trying to regather our lives and rebuild our communities in the hopes that the pandemic is waning. We hope not wearing masks will make us happy. We pray health and wellbeing will bring happiness.

Some years ago, psychologist Mary Pipher wrote:

¹ See <https://www.businessinsider.com/lottery-winners-lost-everything-2017-8#bud-post-lost-162-million-within-a-nightmarish-year-and-his-own-brother-allegedly-put-out-a-hit-on-him-2>

“Ironies abound. With more entertainment, we are bored...in a culture focused on feelings, people grow emotionally numb. With more time-saving devices, we have less time. We have more books, but fewer readers.

We’re in a more elusive crisis, a crisis of meaning, with emotional, spiritual and social aspects. We hunger for values, community, and something greater than ourselves to dedicate our lives to. We wake in the night sorry for ourselves and for our planet.”

The answer to our happiness, says Psalm 1, is not a well-deserved retirement. It comes not as the result of climbing a corporate ladder or any other human achievement. It rests in seeking God.

A recent translation of Psalm 1 (The Common English Bible) reads,

The truly happy person

doesn’t follow wicked advice,
doesn’t stand on the road of sinners,
and doesn’t sit with the disrespectful.

2 Instead of doing those things,

these persons love the LORD’s Instruction,
and they recite God’s Instruction day and night!

3 They are like a tree replanted by streams of water,

which bears fruit at just the right time
and whose leaves don’t fade.

Whatever they do succeeds.

4 That’s not true for the wicked!

They are like dust that the wind blows away.

5 And that’s why the wicked will have no standing in the court of justice—

neither will sinners
in the assembly of the righteous.

6 The LORD is intimately acquainted

with the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked is destroyed.

Look at how Psalm 1 dodges into the bumper-to-bumper traffic of our everyday lives. On one level, it offers bucolic and peaceful images of leafy trees and rushing streams. It’s opening lines are filled with beauty and ripple with delight as they portray the deep joys and sources of human happiness.

Yet this reassurance may ring hollow. Bluntly stated, the Psalmist’s confidence that a life centered on God will bring a harvest of unending happiness does not always square up to the realities we experience.

The Psalmist seems to be offering a tried-and-true template for personal success, warning believers that there are two paths in life – one that leads to success, and one that leads us toward destruction.

Preacher Will Willimon says it is a choice that most of us find hard to accept. Willimon suggests that most of us see the Psalmist as someone you would not want for a roommate. “Here is someone whom your mother might pick for your roommate. But even your mother wouldn’t want to live next door to the person who wrote Psalm 1. Hell would be an entire Saturday night in the presence of this person.”

Not only do we find this sort of “follow the rules and you’ll be happy” approach unappealing, but the hard truth is also that sometimes the good guys do not win. We have all seen the grim faces of those faithful persons who have journeyed so long with Christ, but whose lives bear little resemblance to the fruitful trees the Psalmist describes.

We know those who have lost loved ones far too soon. We know the way cancer eats away at a person. We know a young person filled with mental anguish. We have seen the stress and struggles presented as one wrestles with issues of gender identity and orientation, of choosing a life path, or navigating the steps life.

We all know those who have not followed the way of the wicked, or taken the path tread by sinners, but whose lives are far from happy.

The recently released [world happiness report](#) offers a snapshot of the state of happiness globally. To nobody’s surprise, the virus has had an impact on levels of relative happiness. In the United States, which does not rank in the top-ten happiest places on earth, other studies mark the country’s increased amounts of despair, especially among the white working class who make up a large number of what the Brookings Institute [describes as chronically despairing](#).

These are the questions which arise after talking with parishioners who have done their best to walk in the way of the Lord’s instructions but are now flooded with doubts.

We read the Psalm, and we have doubts. We wonder, “If you’re happy, do you know it?”

In his recent book *Faith After Doubt*, (2021) Brian McLaren sets out to explore the complicated relationship between faith and doubt. McLaren reminds readers of Paul Tillich’s arguments that doubt is included in every act of faith. In McLaren’s view, those who navigate into the deeper, most perplexing questions of belief can also discover a faith that is welcoming of diversity, tolerant of questions, and less reliant on hardened doctrines. Such a faith abides in love, as John would remind us. It dwells secure in the world and allows Jesus’ joy to dwell securely within them.

Such a view allows us to hear the promises offered by Psalm 1 in light of the promises of Jesus, who says to us “I am the way, the truth, the life. I am the one who guides you in moments of greatest despair.”

The righteous, the Psalm tells us, are like trees transplanted from the arid and dry land to the rich, loamy soil of God’s provision. The tree dwells near the flowing streams of God’s love and instruction.

Clint McCann notes that this Psalm describes what it means when God’s people open themselves to God’s instructions. We hear “law” and think rules, but Clint observes that Psalm 1 portrays “happiness as constant openness and attentiveness to God’s instruction.” Psalm 1 points us in a direction.

McCann says [that the translation](#) of verse 3 as “prosper” contributes to a misunderstanding of Psalm 1. The psalm does not hold the promises of material rewards in exchange for faithfulness. Instead, those good, faithful souls who cling to the diminishing candles of faith are those who have found reservoirs of resilience. The trees imagined by the Psalm have seen their share of struggle. But they have roots set deep into the loamy soil of God’s provision.

Those seeking the life offered by Jesus harbor no illusions that the way will be easy. We will stumble. We will face disappointment, and even disaster. There will be shouts of praise and lament, moments of emptiness as well as overflowing abundance. With a clarity of faith that allows for doubt, those who abide with God discover a happiness that cannot be purchased or traded.

The way of God leads toward a happiness which is broader than individual desires, something which has also emerged in studies of the past year. While [the pandemic has generated despair](#), there are also signs of resilience emerging as well. You have seen that: the strengthening of concern for the well-being of all, the ways church members have sought new connections, and the increasing numbers of persons who have [relied on prayer during](#) the crisis.

The Psalm’s wisdom about happiness goes far beyond the quick fixes and feel-good solutions. Those pathways are nothing but dust-filled chaff that proves elusive. But those whose lives have been transplanted near the streams of grace—whose branches are nourished by the faithfulness of God—will be truly happy. Amen.