

Open Up Some Happiness

Matthew 5:1-12

4th Sunday after Epiphany

31st January 2010

Two men are shipwrecked on a desert island. One is extremely upset and paces incessantly around the small patch of sand and rock where they are stranded in the middle of the ocean. "This is miserable," he complains bitterly. "It's bleak. I mean, this is bad. We have no food or water. We're going to die." The second man, though, is quite peaceful, at ease and completely tranquil. He has a big smile on his face as he sits under the shade of a palm tree and settles down to soak up the sun.

His relaxed attitude drives his friend crazy. "How can you be so cheerful at a time like this? We are out in the middle of nowhere. We have no supplies. We have no help. We have no hope. Yet you are so happy. Are you out of your mind?"

The second man says: "You don't understand. I am a rich man. I make \$100,000 a week." Then he leans back with his hands folded behind his head and prepare to take a nap.

The first fellow is now really ticked off and says: "What difference does that make? Who cares how much you make? What good does your money do us now? You don't get it! We have no food, we have no water, we have no shelter, we are gonna die, we're gonna die, we're gonna die!"

With an even bigger smile on his face, the second man says, "Ah, you would be happy too if you knew what I knew. You see, not only do I make \$100,000 a week but I am also my church's largest giver. So I know my pastor will be coming. He will find me!"

Sometimes we are happy without trying too hard. Other times, though, it's difficult to find happiness no matter how hard we try. A recent letter in the "Dear Sharon" advice column of the *Calgary Herald* tells of just this plight.

"Dear Sharon: I am unhappy in my job and am not able to quit or find alternative employment. The work is boring and the pay is low. How can I make my job more tolerable so I feel happier at the end of the day? Signed: R.

"Dear R.: Your situation reflects a reality faced by many people in our society. Some people fantasize that if they could only win a lottery, then they would be able to quit their job and happiness would follow. In fact, many studies indicate that happiness is found within the nature and quality of our jobs. So how does one take a mundane job and make it meaningful? You need to take things into your own hands. [Remember] happiness is a choice, cultivated by our own decision to do things that make us smile, we can find happiness if we choose to do so."¹

A lively 94 year old man appeared with his 75 year old girlfriend on *The Tonight Show* one time and shared his secret of happiness. "I have two choices," he confided, "I can choose to be happy or to be unhappy. I simply choose to be happy and that's all there is to it."² Words reminiscent of Abraham

Lincoln who once said, "Most folks are just about as happy as they make up their minds to be."³

Oh, if only it were that easy! If only we could be happy by making up our minds to be happy! If only happiness were a function of our will-power! If only happiness could be turned on like a switch! But, as we well know, happiness is much more complicated – something many have tried to understand without success. Even children – with all the wisdom of youth – are baffled as to what happiness is.

Attending a wedding for the first time, a little girl whispered to her mother, "Why is the bride dressed in white?" Her mother explained simply, "Because white is the colour of happiness and today is the happiest day of her life." The child thought for a moment, "So, Mommy, why is the bridegroom wearing black?"⁴

One thing that constantly baffles me about happiness is that the people you would expect to be happiest, who have had the greatest advantages, opportunities and successes in life, are so often the most miserable. Take the actress, Angelina Jolie, for instance. Married to Brad Pitt, one of the most desirable men alive. Had her dream of 6 children, 3 adopted, 3 of her own. Consistently voted sexiest woman in the world. Commanded millions to act in Hollywood blockbusters and had fairytale homes. But seemingly she has suffered such great unhappiness. As one writer said, "She had it all. But in that 'all' were issues which no amount of money, fame or beauty could make disappear."⁵

Then, on the other hand, the people you would expect to be unhappiest often are the happiest of all. On the Presbyterian World Service & Development's website, there are a series of photographs of Haiti and the relief work being carried out there in the aftermath of the earthquake. In one of the pictures of the mêlées that take place daily as water is distributed, there is a young boy, perhaps 12 years old, with the most beautiful smile on his face. A smile that, in the midst of all the chaos and devastation, radiates such a measure of happiness. How can that be?⁶

This just goes to show that how complex an entity happiness is. A fact that is underscored by the new science of happiness which has lately become a major focus of researchers in various fields of study. From psychology to biology to neurology. Rather than simply treating negative mood disorders such as depression with medication or counselling, investigators are trying to figure out what positively makes people happy.

Perhaps the most intense area of study centres on the old "Nature-Versus-Nurture" question. Is happiness a learned state of being? Or, are we hard-wired for happiness, as some suggest? Is happiness genetically pre-determined in the same way as we might have blue or brown eyes? There is much

debate in scientific circles and many findings are showing that upwards of 50% of a person's happiness depends on their genes and on such things as the levels of dopamine in the brain.⁷

Does this mean, therefore, that happiness can't be found? That our happiness quotient is foreordained and set-in-stone, unable to be changed in any way? Well, not if the Bible is to be believed. Different parts of the Scriptures from Old and New Testaments would seem to suggest that we human beings can exercise a great deal of control over the state of our hearts and minds, and that there is much that we can do, with God's help, to increase and enhance the happiness we experience in this life.

One of Coca-Cola's current commercials suggests that happiness is to be found in a bottle of Coke. "Open up some happiness," the jingle goes, "Open up a little happiness today so you can be someone new."⁸ Now, I must confess that I have never drunk Coca Cola so I don't know how happy it makes you. I do know that "Things go better with Coca Cola" and I know that "You can't beat the feeling of Coca Cola". I am not sure, though, whether it makes you happier. That I can't say. I do know, however, that you can open up some real happiness by dipping into the pages of the Bible.

Jesus, for instance, shows us how we open up some happiness by emulating those who have already found happiness. But he says that we can only find that happiness, paradoxically, by doing those things that would seem to work against finding happiness. By going against our better judgement and doing those very things that common sense would tell us not to do. In the Beatitudes, for instance, he surprises his hearers by linking happiness not with worldly success but with more radical values, "Happy are those who are spiritually poor ... Happy are those who mourn ... Happy are those who are humble ... Happy are those who do what God requires ... Happy are those who are merciful to others ... Happy are the pure in heart ... Happy are those who seek peace ... Happy are those who are persecuted."⁹ To be happy, says Jesus, is to be prepared to do what is unpopular, to swim against the tide and to be prepared to do those things that go against the grain.

Jesus also points us in the Sermon on the Mount to another hard-to-swallow way in which we can open up some happiness in today's world – and that lies in the area of forgiveness. "You have heard it said, 'An eye for an eye and a tooth for a tooth'. But now I tell you, do not take revenge on someone who wrongs you ... You have heard that it was said, 'Love your friends; hate your enemies', but now I tell you love your enemies and pray for those who persecute you."¹⁰

Clinical psychologist, Dr. Philip Friedman, makes the case for forgiveness as being the key to happiness in his new book, *The Forgiveness Solution*. "Unforgiveness is the core instigator of such emotional and psychological problems. People hold on to grievances, judgments and attacks against themselves and others. They need to learn how to release and let go. People hold on to a lot of guilt or anger for many years and it has corrosive effects" that rob us of our happiness. Friedman invites his readers to imagine a room with several windows. There should be a lot of light coming through but the

windows only allow small slivers of light because they are covered with layers of soot and grime which symbolise the guilt and grievances we harbour in our lives. When we embrace forgiveness, though, it washes away all this soot and grime and lets the light of happiness flow into our lives.¹¹

There are, of course, many other ways the Bible suggests we can open up some happiness. But, if we are going to find happiness as Christians, the real secret is, ironically, not to look for it. But to pursue other goals and let it find us.¹² Rather like the puppy who chases round and round, believing that happiness lies in catching its tail. Until an older dog "clues him in" with words of canine wisdom. "My son, I have noticed that when I chase my tail, it keeps running away from me. But when I just forget about it and go about my business it seems to come after me and find me."

In something of the same way, Jesus never urges us to seek happiness directly. But to do other things and let happiness find us. "Seek first the Kingdom of God, and all these things will be added to you,"¹³ he says at one point. And at another, "For whoever would save his life will lose it, and whoever loses his life for my sake will find it."¹⁴

And when we do these things. When we forget about looking for happiness ... when we seek our Lord's Kingdom ... when we lose our lives for his sake ... then suddenly happiness finds us. As surely as the tail finds the dog.

© George A. Turner
St. Paul's Presbyterian Church
Peterborough, Ontario

¹ Sharon Ryan, "We can choose to be happy at work", Calgary Herald, January 13, 2010 <http://www.calgaryherald.com>

² Robert L. Allen. "Create Your Own Happiness", *Greatest Passages of the Bible*, CSS Publishing Co. www.ChristianGlobe.com

³ Source: www.quotegarden.com/happiness.html

⁴ Source: www.geocities.com/JL_Stinger/jokes/weddingcolors.txt

⁵ Martel Maxwell, "Gorgeous and Rich but life's still the Pitts", *The Scottish Sun*, 29 January 2010

⁶ Presbyterian World Service and Development, <http://www.presbyterian.ca/pwsd/appeals/haiti>

⁷ Wikipedia, "Happiness", <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Happiness>

⁸ Open Happiness <http://www.openhappiness.tv>

⁹ Matthew 5:1-12

¹⁰ Matthew 5:38ff

¹¹ Dr. Philip Friedman, *The Forgiveness Solution*, January 1, 2010, Red Wheel/Weiser, San Francisco, CA, 2009; Amanda Glensky, "Forgiveness is the key to happiness", Montgomery News, January 20, 2010 <http://www.montgomerynews.com>

¹² Robertson Davies "Happiness is always a by-product. It is probably a matter of temperament, and for anything I know it may be glandular. But it is not something that can be demanded from life, and if you are not happy you had better stop worrying about it."

¹³ Matthew 6:33

¹⁴ Matthew 6:33