

August 24, 2014

“If You’re Happy and You Know It Then your Life will Surely Show it.”

SCRIPTURE READING Matthew 5:1-16

I have been looking forward to being with you here at Grace Chapel. I’d guess it was May when I started pondering what my message should be about. Perhaps some learned observations drawn from the genealogies of Second Chronicles. But what happened was, this one song kept going through my head for some reason. I couldn’t shake it. You’ve just heard it:

If you’re happy and you know it clap your hands!/
If you’re happy and you know it clap your hands!/
If you’re happy and you know it, then your life will surely show it,/
If you’re happy and you know it clap your hands!

I learned it as “and your life will surely show it” but “and your face will surely show it” may be earlier and more common. The idea is the same. At first I wasn’t sure what to make of this. It’s a children’s song. You won’t find it in our hymnbook. Bach didn’t harmonize it. The lyrics are a bit repetitive. It’s even a bit silly: “If you’re happy and you know it.” How can you be happy and not know it? But nevertheless, this song just kept after me, pounding into my consciousness.

One reason this song is not in hymnbooks may be because it is a children’s song. But in our hymnbook we do have “Jesus Loves Me, This I Know.” We just sang it! Why not this one? Perhaps the lack of a scriptural basis. If you look at the various hymns, under the title you can find a scriptural reference. It’s very important for the Church for what we do to be based in scripture. So, I started wondering, “Is there some sort of scriptural basis for, “If you’re happy and you know it, then your life will surely show it?”

Well, nothing is obvious. We don’t hear Jesus quoted as saying that. But then, how much of what he said to children do we have in our scriptures? We know Jesus talked to the children. He insisted that nobody should object if the children came to him, and what would he do if not talk with them? The gospel writers didn’t include any of those words. Just as they didn’t include so many other details we would love to know. In that day of hand written communication, it was important for the gospel writers to stick to the essentials of the Message. So, rephrasing the question, did Jesus say anything to his followers that says something like, “If you’re happy and you know it, then your life will surely show it?”

Once I asked that question, I was led to today’s scripture. These words are from perhaps Jesus’s most important discourse, “The Sermon on the Mount.” There is much, much more to Jesus’s words in this passage than what I’ll talk about today. But what I hear him saying, in words adults can understand, is a bit like the message in that children’s song. You see, adults can’t really understand, “If you’re happy and you know it, clap your hands.” We say, “Oh, that’s a nice children’s song.” We don’t really think it’s meaningful for adults. Adults are too sophisticated for that stuff. Listen to Jesus. In the beatitudes and the words that follow, Jesus is saying much the same thing.

Jesus is speaking to his disciples, those who have chosen to follow him and to listen to his words. They have chosen to live in this newly arrived “Kingdom of God.” He is teaching them.

“Blessed are the poor in spirit: for theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

“Blessed are they that mourn: for they shall be comforted.

“Blessed are the meek: for they shall inherit the earth.

“Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness: for they shall be filled.

“Blessed are the merciful: for they shall obtain mercy.

“Blessed are the pure in heart: for they shall see God.

“Blessed are the peacemakers, for they shall be called sons of God.

The word “blessed” is interesting. The word from which this is translated is used in Greek literature to denote the highest stage of happiness, such as the gods, it was supposed, enjoyed. “Blessed” also stands for the Hebrew word that could be translated as “How happy!” Some translations do use the word happy. For example, the Jerusalem Bible reads, “How happy are the poor in spirit; theirs is the kingdom of heaven.” Notice also the present tense. “Blessed are the merciful...”. This blessedness, or happiness, is in the present. “Oh, how happy now are the merciful, for they shall obtain mercy.”

The problem with using the English word “happy” is that there are connotations that don’t fit with what Jesus means. Even the root of the word is a problem. It’s the same as “happenstance”, something that happens, as if it’s random, and we have no control over it. As in, you are happy if your lottery ticket wins, and you’re unhappy if it doesn’t. That’s one reason “blessed” may be the better word for this scripture. It implies a deeper, more satisfying happiness than chance can provide, a happiness that comes with both what we do and how that brings us closer to God.

The word “happy” is especially a problem for us of the modern world. Our form of government is supposed to allow us to “pursue happiness.” So often people seem to drive themselves into depression when they put the pursuit of happiness first. Or, on television, happiness is something you don’t have until you buy the product being advertised. Happiness is achieved by winning, or having your favorite team win, or by finding some sought product at a bargain price. Happiness is what you are supposed to feel watching a TV comedy when the laugh track tells you something is funny.

These contemporary secular meanings of happiness are all shallow, and leave us short of fulfillment. Instead, we find our thoughts and moods hostage to the bad news peppering us from the media. We hear about terrible things happening in the Ukraine, the mid-east, in government, or in the lives of important people. We dwell on problems in our own lives, and in the lives of those we love. Someone has lost a child. Or is suffering from a terrible disease. Or has been left destitute by fire or some other disaster. We have a difficult time feeling happy in any sense. The word “happy” just seems empty and meaningless faced with such reality.

Jesus’s message is, you ARE happy, that is, happy in a truer and deeper sense, blessed, if you are poor in spirit, if you mourn, or are meek. You are happy if you thirst for righteous, are merciful, are pure in heart, or if you can help make peace among others. Jesus is saying that all of these things lead to a deep sense of happiness, fulfillment. That is, blessedness. The world may try to make us unhappy and depressed, but we can find release in Jesus’s words. God promises to meet us wherever we are. It’s the essence of our faith. Paul’s words from Romans, Chapter 8, perhaps put it best:

35: Who shall separate us from the love of Christ? Shall tribulation, or distress, or persecution, or famine, or nakedness, or peril, or sword? [36: As it is written, For thy sake we are killed all the day long; we are accounted as sheep for the slaughter.] 37: Nay, in all these things we are more than conquerors through him that loved us. 38: For I am persuaded, that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor principalities, nor powers, nor things present, nor things to come, 39: Nor height, nor depth, nor any other creature, shall be able to separate us from the love of God, which is in Christ Jesus our Lord.

Paul knew something about suffering. He suffered, and he knew that other early Christians suffered. Yet, he had within him the joy, the happiness, the blessedness, that comes from living a life faithful to Jesus’s

words. He wasn't always smiling, and neither are we. He was sometimes angry, or frustrated, or humiliated, or sorrowful, and even sometimes disappointed in the actions of others who he thought had betrayed him. Just as we are. Yet, the happiness and joy of the gospel permeated his life.

Our biggest problem, our main reason for being unhappy as human beings, is that we were not created as gods. We don't live forever; our bodies wear out. We don't each control our own world. We are buffeted by the actions of others who are careless of our feelings, or even seek to harm us. We are often powerless to protect ourselves. We are usually powerless to obtain the satisfaction of getting even when we are wronged. We learn of terrible things happening in the world, and we feel powerless to do anything that will fix things. And we usually figure we know what ought to be done. Why, if we were in charge, we would make things so that everyone would be perfectly happy! The world would be a great place. We would be powerful enough to make it so! We could fix every wrong. Do you see the contradictions? Consider how much misery has been inflicted by those who have sought power in the name of fixing things, solving humanity's problems, through coercion.

God has protected us from such a miserable world as that. The poor in spirit, the meek: they don't believe they can fix everything. God is to be trusted for making things right in the end. What can we do about the mountains of misery in the world? We can mourn. Just as we do when the mortal life of one of our loved ones comes to an end. We can't fix it. We can only mourn. Through the power of God, and through the sympathy of others, we can be comforted. When we focus on righteousness, and seek to do things that benefit others, we find ourselves uplifted. Think about it. Have you ever managed to mediate between two people who were mad at each other? Perhaps even in your family? Being merciful, pure in heart, or a peacemaker, brings us an inner joy. Even when we are persecuted for doing the right thing, or defending others who are being abused, we find the happiness which Jesus is describing. In such a way, God may lead us to, in some small way, make the world a better place. We are released from the responsibility for all of the world's ills, even while we may be called to some particular action that brings blessing to others, our role of God's kingdom.

Jesus is saying, if we are doing these things that he has told us, we are happy in a deep sense, or blessed. If we are humble, merciful, a peacemaker, we ARE happy. The problem is to know it. To recognize our blessings. When we reflect on God's grace, the wonders of the creation, the blessings others are to us, and come to know it, then we live differently. Living in an attitude of thankfulness helps. When we look at what is good in our lives, and recognize what comes from without – from God, from others, we will also be better able to accept that the bad things in the world are not all ours to worry about as well.

So, know that in these things that we do as followers of Christ, we are indeed happy, blessed! We need to recognize and be lifted up by that joy in our lives, and let it submerge all of those other things that seek to pull us down. Later Jesus elaborates on this with his advice not to worry about tomorrow, about what you will eat, and what you will wear. Jesus not only wants us to be happy by doing as he says. He wants us to be aware of this happiness, this blessedness from God, and that happiness, blessedness, can lift our spirits over the troubles we too often focus on.

What Jesus does NOT mean is that if you do all of these things, life will go just swimmingly. That false doctrine of "wealth and health" would have people believe that by doing the right things, God will bless them with material possessions, good health, and a long life. There are many times when that doesn't happen. No, Jesus is saying that, despite all of the bad things that happen, to Christians as well as to others, and sometimes even more so to Christians, His followers will have a joy, a happiness, a blessedness, that sets them apart. He himself lived out that message, even to the cross.

Jesus is also not trying to lay guilt trips on people. His message is positive. It is NOT, "You'd better be poor in spirit, or you'll be left out of the Kingdom of Heaven." No, Jesus is talking to his disciples. These are

people who have already committed to his way of life, as best they can understand it. His intent is to deepen that understanding. Later in his teachings he expands, and gives examples, and illustrates these truths in parables. Jesus does not mean for us to live fearful, guilt-afflicted lives. That's not happiness or blessedness. [Unfortunately, people sometimes use guilt as a motivator. We may be guilted into contributing more, or volunteering for some responsibility that we really don't feel called to or excited about. That doesn't bring us happiness, and unfortunately, our life and service will show it.] I believe that if we are faithful to what Jesus is saying, the Holy Spirit will lead us to what God intends, and we will make that gift or perform that service with a joy that makes it so much more effective.

Jesus wants us to know that, as his followers, we have good reason to be happy. No, you and I are not gods. But we are children of God, who loves us, cares for us, and has provided for us. We are saved by His power; we don't have to depend on our own. The world will not treat us better than others. But, we are happy and blessed despite all that, for it is God's world, His creation. As Psalm 100 says, "It is He that hath made us, and not we ourselves." We do not have to be responsible for, and carry, all the weight of all of the troubles we experience and hear about. That's God's job. We are free to focus on the teachings of Jesus, things that make us happy and fulfilled. Things that make a difference, to others as well as ourselves.

The apostle Paul says this in his letter to the Philippians, Chapter 4:

8: Finally, brethren, whatsoever things are true, whatsoever things are honest, whatsoever things are just, whatsoever things are pure, whatsoever things are lovely, whatsoever things are of good report, if there be any virtue, and if there be any praise, think on these things.

9: Those things, which ye have both learned, and received, and heard, and seen in me, do: and the God of peace shall be with you.

What we give our attention and energy to matters. Paul knew this, and his life showed it. Nothing else can explain his effectiveness for the Gospel. That seems to be how God's kingdom works.

For, you see, after the beatitudes, Jesus is essentially telling us that your life will show your happiness. What our scripture says is, "You are the salt of the earth. You are the light of the world. A city on a hill. A light." He says, "Let your light so shine before men, that they may see your good works, and glorify your Father which is in heaven." If we live our lives consistent with the words of Jesus, we are blessed, happy in a deep sense, and our lives will surely show it to the world. And the world will be a better place for it.

Amen.