Sunday, February 15, 2004
HOW TO BE HAPPY
Psalm 1

Is there anyone anywhere who deep down does not want to be happy? Maybe, but I don't think so. As I was beginning to work on this sermon, an old-time song came into my mind automatically: "I want to be happy, but I won't be happy till I make you happy too. Life's really worth living, when you are mirth-giving, why can't I give some to you? When skies are gray and you say you are blue, I'll send the sun shining through. I want to be happy, but I won't be happy till I make you happy too."

Then I remembered another song from my childhood that spoke of happiness: "The more we get together, the happier we'll be. For your friends and my friends, and my friends and your friends, the more we get together, the happier we'll be." There's much wisdom in both of these songs on how to be happy. You cannot be happy without healthy relationships with other people. You cannot be happy unless you are making other people happy.

The Bible also has a lot to say about how to be happy. In the book of Proverbs, it is written, "Happy are those who find wisdom and those who get understanding." The book of Psalms is the longest book in the Bible — there are 150 different Psalms.

It's revealing that in the Hebrew language and the Greek language, the word for "blessed" can also be translated into English as "happy." Thus some earlier translations of Psalm 1 state, "Blessed are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, etc." However, newer translations use the word "happy": "Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked." It makes good sense that the terms "blessed" and "happy" are interchangeable. People who see themselves as blessed are always happy, and people who are happy consider themselves to be blessed.

When Jesus preached his "Sermon on the Mount" in Matthew, and in his "Sermon on the Plain" in Luke's gospel, he begins those sermons with what we now call the "Beatitudes." In these statements, he describes those who are blessed or happy. "Happy are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Happy are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Happy are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. Happy are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled. Happy are the merciful, for they will receive mercy. Happy are the pure in heart, for they will see God. Happy are the peacemakers, for they will be called the children of God. Happy are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven."

Psalm 1 also describes those who want to be happy: "Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of the scoffers; but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night."

The Psalm then goes on to say that "Happy people are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper."

According to Psalm 1, if you want to be happy, there are three things to avoid: following the way of the wicked, taking the path of sinners, and sitting in the seat of the scoffers. That does not sound too difficult, but in the scriptures, these three are ranked from the smallest to the

largest obstacles to true happiness. Following the advice of the wicked will keep you from being happy. Taking the path that sinners tread will keep you from being happy. But what keeps you from being happy more than anything else is being a scoffer.

When you understand being happy in this context, you can understand why happiness is a choice. You can choose or choose not to follow the advice of the wicked or to take the path that sinners tread. You can choose to be merciful or you can choose to be unmerciful. You can choose to be pure in heart or not to be pure in heart. Above all, if you want to be happy, avoid being a scoffer. The word "scoffer" is not heard very often these days, but it's a good word.

What does it mean to be a scoffer? Someone said, "The worst sin is that of taking a seat in the meetings of the scoffers and actively participating in their mocking of things which are sacred." Being a scoffer prevents you from being happy because you refuse to admit the possibility that life is good and that you can be happy now. The opposite of happiness is not unhappiness. The opposite of happiness is cynicism. Cynicism has not only given up on happiness but insists that everyone else give up on it as well.

Why does being a scoffer prevent you from being happy? Because in scoffing, you mock and devalue the very things that could heal you and make you whole, blessed, and happy. To be a scoffer is to make fun of the joys in life that are intended to bless you.

Scoffers assume that there is nothing more to learn, nothing more to know; they have given up on the idea that tomorrow can be better than today. Someone once described scoffers as those who are aggressive in promoting mediocrity. A scoffer has the attitude, "If I cannot be great, then nobody is going to be great."

Dietrich Bonhoeffer described scoffers this way: "A scoffer, when smelling a beautiful rose in the garden, will inevitably sniff for the manure under the roses."

The tempting part of being a scoffer is that it makes you sound so realistic, so tough-minded, so sophisticated. The scoffer says, "Why be good? It's a waste of time. No one appreciates it anyway." I believe it was Leo Durocher who said, "Nice guys finish last." John Barrymore said, "The good die young because they see it's no use living if you've got to be good." One philosopher said, "No good deed goes unpunished." That's why the first Psalm understands scoffing to be such a danger to happiness.

Another reason people struggle with happiness is that it is frequently misunderstood. When the Bible talks about being happy, it is more than a feeling or a mood. It is an attitude toward life.

In his book Happiness is a Choice, Barry Neil Kaufman tells this true story. During a question-and-answer segment immediately following a class he was conducting on developing attitudes, a participant cautiously asked this question: "I'm having so much trouble with my asthma. I've gone from doctor to doctor. I take all the medication they've prescribed, but nothing really helps. I can't stand it. I wonder if you could say something, well, anything that might be useful?"

Kaufman hesitated for a moment. The class had only a few minutes left. Then he said, "This may sound silly or crazy or both, but I'll do my best to give you a useful response. Be happy with your asthma. Love it like a good friend. If you change your attitude toward it, you'll change the chemistry of your body. Every thought we have is a physical event. Neurotransmitters and neuro-peptides pop into existence throughout the body each time we activate a belief. Change

the belief (the thought, the judgment) and we change or, at the very least, influence the physical event we call body-mind. Your attitude and intelligence exist everywhere in the 50 trillion cells of your body. This is a marvelous and concrete opportunity for you, not just a pie-in-the-sky game. Give yourself and your asthma a different message and see what happens. So when you have the tightness in your chest, the shortness of breath, the wheezing or coughing, you could first welcome it, talk to it, even play with it. Then open yourself, ultimately, to loving it... really loving it."

The next day, he came to the morning session of the program visibly rested and alert. "I had a special experience last night," he told the group. "I greeted my nightly wheezing with a smile instead of my usual annoyance or depression. I actually did say hello out loud and laughed. I talked to my asthma like a friend. Wow, we sure have a lot of history together." He smiled shyly, then continued, "I even thanked my bronchial tubes each time I coughed. At first, I felt, well, absolutely ridiculous, but soon something magically freed up inside and I really felt loving and loved." His eyes filled with tears. "You know, in no time at all, I fell asleep. Right now, I feel more comfortable and peaceful in my body than I have in months."

I repeat, the first main point the Bible makes about how to be happy is that happiness is not a feeling or a mood, but an attitude toward life.

The second point the Bible makes on how to be happy, especially in the first Psalm, is that God's intention is for you to be happy, and you fulfill this intention and develop the attitude by living a good life.

Happiness in the Biblical understanding is not a psychological state, but an ethical one. To be happy is to live a morally good life. I hear people ask all the time, "Why be good?" Usually, I respond to that question by first asking, "Why be bad? Or why be unethical or immoral or lazy? Does that kind of behavior bring you happiness? Is it really more enjoyable to live an evil or useless life?"

Years ago, I remember reading a very sad book, The Windsor Style. It was about the Duke and Duchess of Windsor and the kind of life they lived. The Duke of Windsor was the former King of England who abdicated the throne to marry an American woman, Wallis Warfield Simpson. The Duke described an average day in his life: "I got up late and then I went with the Duchess and watched her buy a hat."

The Duchess said, "I would rather shop than eat," and her days were filled with fittings and having her hair done. The Windsors dined out almost every night, all dressed up, or dined at home, all dressed up. They relished the minor arts of exquisite living, dressing, eating, and entertaining. The book describes these minor arts in revealing detail. Their toilet paper was unrolled and cut into prepared squares for them by their staff. Their toothpaste was squeezed onto their toothbrushes for them. The freshly ironed sheets were carried to their bed by their maids so that they would not be creased. Their kitchen staff sorted their salad leaves to match them for size. Their dogs were served their meals in silver bowls by a footman wearing a special uniform.

The book overwhelms the reader with the details of a pampered life and ultimately presents the Duke and Duchess of Windsor as two absurd, bored, and unhappy people. One of their servants, who had been with them for many years, described their declining years as spending quarrelsome evenings with a bottle of whiskey. They had nothing and no one. They were two lonely old people.

Happiness is the byproduct of doing good. In the teachings of Jesus, doing good is more than simply obeying the rules. People who are “righteous” are those who follow the rules but go no further. They take great satisfaction in keeping the letter of the law and can be very judgmental toward those who do not. But all too frequently, they do not extend themselves beyond what the law requires. They are not compassionate. The priest and the Levite in Jesus’ parable of the Good Samaritan were sincerely righteous people, but they left a wounded stranger to die in a roadside ditch, passing by on the other side. Because the stranger could’ve been dead, it would have made them impure to touch him.

Fortunately, the human race in its more enlightened moments has placed a higher value on doing good than on being righteous. Most people, when they are reasonably free from insecurity and anxiety, tend to support the efforts of those who do good for its own sake, and many find themselves doing good not for any reward but simply because doing good is its own reward. Happiness is the result.

Why be good? To be good, in the sense that Jesus and other Biblical teachers describe goodness, is to be true to your basic God-given nature. Why be good? Because God is good, and it is in the core of your nature to be good. Then you are living up to what you are meant to be, and genuine happiness is the result. Amen.