

Pastor Bill Sass – Sermon for Sunday, November 1, 2020

WHAT IN THE WORLD IS HAPPINESS?

Luke 6:20-31; Matthew 5:1-12

(All Saints Day)

A family had sold everything possible to pay bills, and put food on the table. Nevertheless, a burglar broke in one night when the family was gone. The family returned and found the door knocked off its hinges. “What did the burglar get?” the police officer asked. The head of the house just shook his head. “Practice,” he said.

It’s not easy being poor. What did Jesus mean, “Blessed are the poor?”

Jesus was a master at keeping his listeners off-balance. He always said the unexpected. He praised people others despised. He lifted up those, other put down. “It is more blessed to give than to receive.” “For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me, will have it.” And two-thousand years after His death and resurrection, theologians still wrestle with His exact meaning. No better example can be found than the Beatitudes found in differing forms in both Matthew and Luke.

First of all, let’s dispel the notion that Jesus was a dreamer—out of touch with the real world. Do you know Thornton Wilder’s *Heaven’s My Destination*? It’s a comical little play about a poor soul who attempts to put the Sermon on the Mount into practice. The results are disastrous. In one scene, he refuses to take interest on his savings account, because he does not believe in usury. Other customers, overhearing his argument with the teller, suspect that something is amiss at the bank, and begin demanding their money. And the bank nearly collapses. The implication is that literal adherence to Jesus’ teachings results either in comedy or tragedy, depending on your sense of irony.

When author Philip Yancey was teaching a class on the Beatitudes, he decided to incorporate into the lesson a video of Cecil B. DeMille’s movie *King of Kings*. As Yancey fast-forwarded through much of the movie, he watched another television nearby. This happened to be at the end of the Gulf War, and was featuring a speech by Gen. Norman Schwarzkopf. The general pulled out maps and diagrams, explaining in detail how America’s superior weaponry and training easily overcame Iraq.

Philip Yancey switched his attention back and forth between the Jesus movie, and the news conference. Yancey found the place he was looking for in the movie, the scene where Jesus preaches the Sermon on the Mount. And as the character of Jesus spoke of blessings upon the poor in spirit and the suffering, Philip Yancey caught the irony.

Gen. Schwarzkopf was extolling the virtues of bigness, strength, power, conquering through force. Jesus was preaching on humility, lowliness, gratitude. His words must have been shocking to a subjugated people caught in a warring nation. Why didn’t He lead them in a bloody rebellion? Why didn’t He establish a new kingdom? Could it be He had a different kingdom in mind for them? Jesus

did have a different kingdom in mind—a kingdom of the Spirit. He was no dreamer. He knew His followers would be persecuted. He knew many of them would be rejected by family and friend. He knew that many of them would live their lives on the edge of abject poverty, because of their commitment to Him. That’s still true today in many parts of the world.

Jesus knew hardships His followers would endure, but He wanted them to know happiness isn’t dependent on outward circumstance. Happiness comes from within. But let’s begin by admitting that Jesus was not in denial.

Secondly, let’s acknowledge when people look for happiness elsewhere, they are less happy, rather than more. Joseph R. Sizoo tells of visiting a luxurious estate—one of the most luxurious in America. Within the house were Italian fireplaces, Belgian tapestries, Oriental rugs, and rare paintings.

Sizoo said to a friend, “How happy the people must have been who lived here!”

“But they weren’t.” his friend replied. “Although they were millionaires, the husband and wife never spoke to each other. This place was a hotbed of hatred! They had no love for God, or for one another.”

Where are you going to turn for happiness? Your work? There is certainly much satisfaction in a job well done. But today’s fast-changing world is turning many talented, intelligent people into hanging on to jobs for which their skills are no longer needed. If work is your chief source of happiness, beware. It’s a cruel world out there, as many people are discovering all too well.

Of course, you have your family. The Roper Organization asked Americans what they believed constituted “the good life.” The ranking was instructive. First were material aspirations, second was a happy marriage, and third was children. A Mass Mutual study of family values showed that eight out of ten Americans reported that their families were the greatest source of pleasure in their lives—more than friends, religion, recreation, or work. In a survey of ten thousand *Better Homes and Gardens* readers (a majority were baby boomers), more than half said their relationship to their spouse was the single most important factor in their personal happiness—well ahead of children, spiritual or religious belief, health, or even financial security.

We prize our families, but even family circumstances change. A spouse can bring great joy into your life—and then break your heart. So can children. And sooner or later, all whom we love leave home—whether for college, a family of their own, or the grave. If you have invested all you have, and all you are, in your family, where will you be then?

In 1954, Billie Steard’s twelve-year-old son, George, died of cancer. George was the center of Billie’s life. She was a wealthy woman, and she lavished all the best toys and things on her son. After his death, Billie Steard became a recluse. She refused to change anything in George’s room. All his clothes and toys stayed just where he had left them. Billie cut off most of her social contacts. For the next twenty-five years, Billie spent all her time at home grieving for George. She may have died in 1979, but her life actually ended in 1954.

On what do you depend for your happiness? Jesus was no dreamer. And experience has taught us that when people look elsewhere for their happiness, they end up less happy, rather than more happy.

Finally, let's acknowledge that if we lived according to Christ's plan for our lives, we would have a zest for living.

Suppose we lived our lives having as our greatest values, love for God and love for others? Suppose instead of burning ourselves out seeking wealth or status, we lived all our lives seeking to expand our divine potential, so we were continually improving our minds, improving our bodies, improving our Spirits—not out of fear, insecurity, greed or lust, but simply out of living fully, and completely, as children of God? Can you see how much more productive, how much more effective, how much more alive we would be?

This is All Saints Day. This is what saintly living is all about. It is not about cloistering ourselves away from the world—though many saints have found much joy in developing that intense relationship with God. For most of us, though, saintly living is about turning the world of human values on its head. It is about moving from a life that is self-centered, to a life that is God-centered, and other-centered. It is about moving to a profound gratitude for all we have. Thus, we find true happiness. Thus, we find true blessedness.

In 1989, columnist Nick Clooney decided that he wanted someone else to do his work for a little while. So he invited a variety of local celebrities from the Kentucky-Ohio area to send in their ideas on a column about epitaphs. What would these famous men and women want written on their tombstones? He was surprised by the wit and sincerity of the various responses.

Ira Joe Fisher, a weather man, wrote this epitaph for himself: "He wanted the mind of Plato, the heart and soul of Socrates. But his life was more a tribute to Mediocrities."

Paul Knue, editor of the *Cincinnati Post*, couldn't make up his mind about what to write, until after he and his family went away for a weekend trip. When he returned, Paul wanted an epitaph that reflected the importance of family in his life. He chose as his epitaph two simple words: "He cared."

But the most sweetly, whimsical message must surely be from Charles Mechem, former head of Taft Broadcasting. His epitaph read: "Dear God, Thanks for letting me visit. I had a wonderful time."

Jesus was no dreamer. Just the opposite. Jesus knew lasting happiness is not found in wealth, or a full stomach, or the esteem of our friends, or even family relationships—though all of these can satisfy for a while. All of these are important. But there is only one source for true and complete happiness—God.

AMEN!