

15 September 2019

Counter-Cultural Happiness
Matthew 6:25-34; Luke 9:23-24

As we begin a sermon series on the counter-cultural teachings of our faith, we will find ourselves almost exclusively in the teachings of Jesus, especially in the Sermon on the Mount. We read from that Sermon now: Matthew 6, verses 25-34:

²⁵‘Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food, and the body more than clothing? ²⁶Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? ²⁷And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? ²⁸And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, ²⁹yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. ³⁰But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? ³¹Therefore do not worry, saying, “What will we eat?” or “What will we drink?” or “What will we wear?” ³²For it is the Gentiles who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly Father knows that you need all these things. ³³But strive first for the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. ³⁴So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today’s trouble is enough for today.

Aristotle, in his *Ethics*, defines the goal of humanity as that of being happy. Aristotle is currently appearing in a series of television commercials, in the part of “Captain Obvious.” Of *course*, we want to be happy. And it’s our right, isn’t it? It’s written into our Declaration of Independence. Among our God-given “inalienable rights” is the “pursuit of happiness.”

So why is there so little happiness? I mean, isn’t that your impression? Think about it this way. If you are anxious about something, you aren’t happy. If you are afraid of something, you aren’t happy. If you are angry, you aren’t happy. If you are lonely, you aren’t happy. If you are jealous or envious or resentful, you aren’t happy. So what characterizes our society today: is it happiness or is it anxiety, fear, anger, loneliness, jealousy, envy, and resentfulness? We are all, supposedly, pursuing happiness, but we must really stink at it. Either we’re not trying very hard, or else we’re not pursuing it in the right places. So let’s start with that. Where *are* we 21st century Americans looking for happiness?

Well, in wealth. That’s a big enough issue that it deserves its own sermon – say, next week – but we have to at least touch on it here, because it is probably our number one culprit. Our default assumption as Americans is that happiness comes with wealth. And this isn’t a recent development, either. As some of you may know, the first draft of the Declaration of Independence didn’t say “pursuit of happiness” but “pursuit of property.” Even then, the concepts were nearly interchangeable in the American mind. But, given how miserable we are as a culture, this pursuit of property has not resulted in happiness – even among those who achieve wealth. The most pathetically unhappy human being I know of is a millionaire real estate developer. So why doesn’t this work? Here are a couple of reasons. First, because our usual way of knowing when we are wealthy is by comparing ourselves to others, and there is always someone richer. The pursuit of wealth has no finish line. Second, the more we have, the more

frightened we are that someone will take it away from us. So wealth breeds envy and fear, and both kill happiness.

Another place many seek happiness, apparently, is in beauty – based on how many billions of dollars we spend each year on beauty products, beauty treatments, plastic surgery, diets, and weight loss programs. (Yes, I know some people try to lose weight for health reasons, but I would still wonder how much time those people spend checking their blood pressure compared to posing in front of the mirror.) As a culture, we are obsessed with physical beauty. But again, this clearly doesn't bring us happiness, even for the beautiful people. I read about a study done a few years ago on happiness among high school students, and one of the things that they found was that ordinary, plain looking adolescents were, by and large, happier than those who were attractive. It would appear that physical beauty hinders happiness more often than it helps. We're better off not being much to look at. (God has been good to me.) Why doesn't beauty work? Well, again there's the problem of envy: there is always someone more beautiful, usually right there on television. But also, of all the temporary things to pin your happiness hopes on, what is more fleeting than outward beauty?

Well, I'll tell you what's more fleeting: fame. But that has become another of our great American obsessions, especially among the young. Surveys show that more teens dream of being famous than rich. (Our founding fathers would be so disappointed!) You see, in our world of American Idol and The Voice and YouTube stars that no one had heard of last week but who have millions of "followers" today, fame almost seems accessible. And, of course there are other ways to become famous: fame is often one goal of school shooters, for instance. But being famous doesn't make us happy either. The age of sudden fame is also the age of being forgotten just as quickly, or worse, becoming a public object of ridicule. I could continue like this, running through all the American obsessions that fail to bring happiness – power, control, admiration – but you see the point. All these things are like cotton candy – sweet and empty and fleeting.

That brings us back to the passage we read from Matthew 6. Here Jesus says – much more eloquently – all I just said. "Why are you worried about how much you have, or how nice your clothes are, and stuff like that? Life is not about those things. All that stuff is like grass, here for a moment then gone. And why are you worrying at all? *Can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? . . . So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring worries of its own. Today's trouble is enough for today.*" It's a beautiful and powerful passage of scripture. But there's one frustrating thing about most of it. We may not be experts on how to be happy – well, obviously we aren't – but one thing we do know: just telling someone to be happy doesn't work. Being told "Do not be anxious" doesn't make us less anxious. If anything, it adds a new anxiety: "Am I too anxious?" Telling someone "don't worry; be happy," doesn't help anything. It just makes us hate Bobby McFerrin. (Children, Bobby McFerrin is a singer who sang a very annoying song called "Don't Worry. Be Happy" that I have just implanted in your parents' brains.) So, for most of this passage in Matthew 6, Jesus seems to be telling us to be less anxious without giving us any help on how. Then we read verse 33: *But seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well.*

There's an important shift here. Think of it this way: imagine your happiness is distilled into a small ball. But it's fragile. You have to keep it in a safe place. To what will you entrust your happiness? Wealth isn't secure. Beauty fails. Fame flickers. Where should you keep your happiness? The self-help gurus will tell you that you must find your happiness within yourself

and keep it in your own being. And maybe that's better, but I'm not sure. Frankly, I'm not all that stable myself. I am swayed by my emotions and thoughts a dozen different ways all day. I want my happiness to depend on something more secure than me. Jesus says to direct our search toward God, who is more stable, more dependable, than any of the above.

And how do we do that? *How* do we seek God? Let me read another familiar teaching of Jesus, from Luke 9, verses 23 and 24. *Then he said to them all, 'If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves and take up their cross daily and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.* Let me read v. 24 again: *Those who want to save their life will lose it, and those who lose their life for my sake will save it.*

I told you at the start of this series that we would be looking at the teachings of Jesus that didn't fit our cultural assumptions. Some of them, though, aren't just counter-cultural but counter-intuitive. That is, they don't make sense. But truth is more than just making sense. In this verse we find a crucial teaching of Jesus that is frankly irrational, but that comes from somewhere deeper than Reason. C.S. Lewis might call it "deeper magic from before the dawn of time." This is what Jesus says: we find God when we seek God in those around us and put them before ourselves. We find happiness when we choose others' happiness before our own. We become full when we willingly empty ourselves for others. We find abundance in joyous giving. We become beautiful when we delight in the beauty of our neighbors. We find our true voices in learning to listen to others. We become most truly ourselves when we joyfully give ourselves away. We reflect the image of God when we seek God's image in those around us who are different from us. We become most like Almighty God, Creator of Heaven and earth, when we humble ourselves in love.

So the only way to be happy is to stop caring about our own happiness. No, it doesn't make a lick of sense, but I don't see any sign that that bothered Jesus. He taught it anyway. More than that, he lived it. This is how Jesus led his life, irrationally but intentionally in love and service to others. And I want to stress that word "intentionally." This emptying of ourselves has to be our choice. Those who put aside their own happiness out of duty or fear, because an abusive partner demands it for instance, do not find happiness but bondage. But if you will find happiness, this is the way that our faith teaches: seek it by seeking the well-being of your neighbor first. And in that search, we find the kingdom of God.

Be forewarned, though: if you learn to do that, you will seriously stand out in our culture, obsessed as it is with everything that brings the least joy. You will be out of place on Facebook and Twitter; you will make others uncomfortable when they launch into their political rants. You will not be understood. But it will be so worth it.