

MAGNIFICAT FAITH: MORE THAN CHECKING THE BOXES; PS.119:1-8, DEUT. 30:15-20, MATT. 5:21-37; 2.16.20; THOMAS H. YORTY; WESTMINSTER CHURCH

At last Friday's Winterfest a man who'd read my article in the recent issue of *Traffic East* asked me "What is a poem?" It was an unusual thing to ask and I felt somewhat inadequate not having a ready answer.

I ended up saying "a poem is a living thing, it breathes the air of shared human experience; it evokes feeling; like sitting with a friend in conversation, a poem asks for a response, feelings are evoked, something in you wants to speak out."

But since that conversation the question has continued to beg for an answer. So what else to do but Google an answer which, as it turned out, was no help at all. All of the at least dozen definitions were technical and less helpful than my own, if I say so myself.

The more I thought about it, the more I appreciated the man who asked the question. "When you read a poem in your last paper," he said, (we both belong to a men's group in which members give papers on a wide range of subjects), "when you read a poem and talked about it, everyone seemed to know what you were talking about but me."

I loved his honesty. Who among us would admit to not knowing what a poem is, but then have the curiosity to pursue the question. To seek out an answer, to ask other people. To admit to not-knowing with regard to one of the most popular and common kinds of literature?

Which brought me full circle because I realized that the man who asked me that question has exactly the perspective that is required to be a poet. You have to have a basic curiosity that causes you to inquire about and see with fresh eyes everything, especially routine, daily, mundane things most of the rest of the world takes for granted and walks right by. You have to be willing to ask, for example, *what is a poem*.

I'd like for us to adopt that man's perspective and ask us a question I suspect we may take for granted we know the answer to; the question is this: What is happiness? Most of us probably think we know what happiness is or what it takes for us to be happy. But I also know that I, and I'll bet, more than a few of us have been programmed by our post-industrial economy and culture to associate happiness with material things.

Money for one – every state has its lotto games that lure millions of people every day to part with the very thing they want to be happy in order to buy tickets of chance; very, very slim chance at getting even their money back. The odds are so slim in fact that you might as well just give the clerk at the convenience store your dollar or ten dollars or however much you intend on spending for the seconds-long anticipatory euphoria of becoming crazy rich.

But it's not just money, it's the things money can buy; the ability to acquire whatever you want: clothes, travel, second homes, cars, art, philanthropic generosity. There's nothing wrong with any of those things, except that they have little to do with what gives true happiness. Freedom? Does that make us happy? Health? Friends? Popularity? Safety? Success? There are plenty of unhappy people with each of those things. Google once again failed to give a helpful answer. Happiness the cyber world proclaimed is a state of mind, peace with yourself, contentment, well-being, a sense of purpose; all about as revealing as saying the Pope is Catholic.

But let us not despair, we have the Psalm we heard the choir chant this morning, the reading from Deuteronomy, and Jesus' Sermon on the Mount; together they answer the question "What is happiness?"

But before we go to those texts, consider one of the most famous Biblical definitions of happiness; it comes from the opening of Jesus' Sermon on the Mount that we heard Beth preach on just two weeks ago. I'm talking about the "Beatitudes" or "Blessings" of Matthew. A better translation for the word "blessed" as in "blessed are those," is "happy" as in "happy are those."

Listen to the conditions Jesus says lead to happiness: those who are poor in spirit, who mourn; those who are meek; those who hunger and thirst for righteousness; who are merciful; who are pure in heart; those who are peacemakers. And, if you think those are strange definitions of happiness how about this one: "happy are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, happy are you when people insult you, persecute you, and say all kinds of evil things against you on my account..."

If wealth, health and popularity are not the source of human happiness then, you may be thinking, how could these hard-boiled, mostly depravations called beatitudes possibly lead to happiness.

I'm glad you asked! The Psalm today, 119, is the longest in the bible; it is a Psalm that was intended to be memorized and assimilated into daily life, to meet every condition of human experience. It is a five page epic poem on the rewards, benefits, and triumph of life for those who study, learn, adhere to and commit their earthly existence to following God's decrees.

The Psalm begins by identifying *the key that unlocks the abundant life of the people of God* – "Happy are they whose ways are blameless, who walk according to the law, who keep his statutes, who do nothing wrong, who are steadfast obeying God's decrees; who praise God with an upright heart, who learn God's ways and are not forsaken by God." That's a list as strange as those other "happy are they" sayings of Jesus, but this one focuses on staying within, living by legal boundaries; sort of a fifty ways not to leave your lover but to abide by the law.

What makes the focus on abiding by God's laws seem strange is that we live in a society that thrives on freedom; our ideal is the rugged individual who determines everything for himself; you can see how the masters of marketing have manipulated this uniquely American ethic into a golden goose of consumer culture that equates happiness with material things; the irony of which is you have to join the herd to be happy.

But Jesus comes to restore the human family, not to sell us anything or make more millionaires or increase quarterly revenue. He comes to liberate us from all that holds us back as human beings from realizing the fullness of life for which we were created; and which Jesus agrees with the Hebrew Scripture in identifying *the law as the source of our happiness*. He aims, therefore, not to add or delete even one dot of one "i" or one cross of one "t" of God's law but to fulfill it.

Yet he fulfills it in a way that, strangely, makes it harder to be law-abiding. He says if you are angry or lustful toward another person that you have already committed murder or adultery in your heart. You see, Jesus internalizes what can otherwise be easily treated as a set of rules that can become boxes to be checked without having any effect on the believer.

Jesus is clear, it's our hearts he is interested in. But not just our hearts, it is our relationships with each other and with God and with all living things, it is our relationship with the very earth itself, it is to be sure our relationship with ourselves that not just Jesus but the Law and prophets before him were interested in.

This is the whole foundation of life for God's people – it is about honoring God, honoring our parents, honoring our spouses, our neighbors, the stranger and then, of course, given the detailed and specific laws around food and the preparation of food it is about honoring plant and animal life.

In the reading we have today from Deuteronomy we pick up the story at the end of forty years of the people wandering in the wilderness, just before they enter the Promised Land. Moses, the greatest leader of the people, bar none, has a heart to heart talk with them; before they take possession of this long awaited homeland where they will be a light to the nations *because* of their life with each other, *because* of their honoring of the gift of life in all of its manifestations from friendship to marriage to parenting to neighborhood to the mere fact of sharing this existence as a fellow human being regardless of color or creed or even friend or enemy – *because* of the *way they live together* other families will want to know this God they worship and serve and they will want to emulate his people.

Therefore, Moses reminds them of their mission and gets them to agree before they leave behind their nomadic life and become a great nation that they have the most sacred choice humans face – the option to choose life or death. “If you obey the Lord your God's commandments,” says Moses, “by walking in his ways, keeping his commandments, his regulations, and his case laws then you will live and thrive and the Lord will bless you. If you do not and you follow other gods you will perish.”

Jesus faces this choice perhaps nowhere so dramatically and clearly as he does in *his* wilderness when Satan tempts him three times with popularity, power and social justice if he will serve Satan; but Jesus rejects all three not because they are intrinsically bad but because they violate the first commandment – that we will worship and serve only God.

It's being aware of and staying within the boundaries of life that keeps our relationships healthy and thriving. Calvin called this “covenant theology” – the life of faith can be equated with our covenants, our relationships with each other – and we see this from the first covenant God makes with Noah and all the other covenants with Israel's leaders.

Our faith is not practiced in isolation but with and among the covenant community. Moses tells us before his pep talk today, loving God and keeping God's commandments means not rules but acts of compassion: “sharing feasts with the hungry; canceling debts the poor cannot pay; organizing government to guard against excessive wealth; sharing hospitality for the runaway slave; not charging interest on loans in the covenant community; paying hired hands promptly what they earn; leaving the residue of the harvest for the disadvantaged; limiting punishment to protect human dignity.”

The list could go on but the point is we are called into a dense network of social relationships that depends on keeping the decrees and laws of God.

Obedience to alien gods such as fertility gods reduced life to techniques and systems that secured life on my terms but was hostile to and toxic for social relations and covenantal relationships.

Just as peace is more than the absence of conflict, happiness is more than the absence of sadness. Happiness is encompassing of and defined by our relationships.

Happiness is not just being able to afford the car of your dreams or getting a day off because of a national holiday; or being promoted with a nice raise.

Happiness is fulfilling your end of the relationship as a husband or wife, brother or sister, parent or supervisor or neighbor or citizen. It is being the best you can be in the myriad relationships that make up and give meaning to the way you spend your time and money and talent. It's caring enough to leave this church, city, nation and world better than you found them. A senior statesman of this congregation said to me, "it's not about what you have it's about what you share."

A dear friend of ours from Pennsylvania died last October. He wasn't yet 70, married with two daughters and three grandchildren who live nearby and to whom he was devoted. He was a scientist and engineer by training and entrepreneur of a successful business he started and hand-picked a leader of the company to succeed him and gave her contract that transferred the company to her; but his passion was flyfishing.

It was his time on the stream that he cherished being on the catch and release section of the Bushkill River early in the morning to watch the insect life begin to stir then fish begin to feed; he could identify all of the birds and spot a fox or muskrat others would be blind to. He taught us how to care for the stream.

In the announcement of his death his wife included a picture of David in his windbreaker at the Lafayette/Lehigh football game, the former his beloved alma mater of which he was a faithful, generous alum. And there were two short pieces of his writing one on catching the largest brown trout he'd ever caught the other a reflection on why we are here.

"How infinitesimally small we are," David writes, "given the vast expanse of the universe. I can't think of a word that expresses our relative smallness; there may not even be one. To even think we could be located in the cosmos seems almost absurd. Yet, as small as we may feel, consider that infinitesimally smaller is the possibility that on this one wee bit of matter somewhere in the vastness...we live.

In the wide coldness of the universe and all of its billions of galaxies of stars and planets and moons and comets...on one eensi spec amid it all we have evolved from some primordial organic soup to live and breathe and walk – and more spectacular than that to be able to think and reason and understand – to desire and imagine; to design and build the things we dream of....

Consider what an incredible fortune it is just to be alive, dwelling in relative comfort in the vast cold universe – that even the least of us has had the experience to live, breathe, and observe our beautiful surroundings and be conscious of ourselves and those we love, privileges we very much take for granted, and if that weren't enough we have the ability to make progeny of ourselves so in kind we may continue the experience.

David was a happy man. He was faithful in the covenants with family, friends, work, the natural world. He wasn't just checking the boxes, going through the motions; he was keeping his covenants healthy, giving himself to others.

Happy, blessed are you and I when we keep faith with those we love, the community we have responsibility for in this vulnerable, beautiful planet earth. +