

ON THE MEANING OF HAPPINESS

INTRODUCTION

The sermon this morning has to do with happiness.

Many times over the past two or three weeks you have probably given and received the conventional greeting associated with this time of year, HAPPY NEW YEAR! Two or three questions right here at the beginning in order to get you thinking: were you happy last year? Are you happy now doing what you are doing? How many Americans do you suppose are really happy? How would they compare in happiness with the people shall we say of Russia or India? What do you mean by happiness? How would you define it? And finally this question, a question which we shall consider and explore a little more carefully: WHAT WOULD MAKE YOU HAPPY IN 1960?

DEVELOPMENT

I think it would be quite interesting if I were to step out of the pulpit and come down into the congregation and move about among you asking different individuals in the style of some of our present day TV personalities this question: what would make you happy in 1960? However, I'm not going to do it. First of all because this is not the time or place to do this sort of thing, and second because I know most of you well enough to know what would make you happy in 1960 without having to ask you. But if we were to do this sort of thing, it would be interesting, and we'd probably have as many answers to the question as there are people sitting here, and yet I can't help but feel that most of the answers to this question would fall into groups of similar things.

For instance one person (and I have the feeling that this person might be multiplied several times over in this congregation) one person might answer the question in this fashion: "You ask me what would make me happy in 1960? We'll I'll tell you, and I'll be honest with you. I'd be happy if only I had the love and the companionship of another person. That's all I need to make me happy in 1960. That's all I need in order to make my life complete - the love and the companionship of another person." To be sure, there are thousands of people dying of starvation in our city, and mind you they're not starving for food either. They're starving for affection. They go home at night to one room apartments and as they look forward to another year, they will tell you quite frankly that what would make them happy in 1960 would be the arrival of a person with whom they could share their life - a husband, a wife, or perhaps a companion or a friend.

Another person might answer our question in this way: "I'd be happy in 1960 if only I could recover my health. I haven't been well for some time. As a matter of fact hardly a day has gone by in the past two years that I've not been without some pain. Because of this I have not been able to move around doing some of the things I enjoy doing. And I'd be so happy in 1960 if only I could recover my health, if only someone could wave a magic wand over my poor broken body and make it well again. That's all I ask." Certainly all of us can appreciate that wish and pray that it may be so for those for whom this is a concern.

Turning to another person, we might receive this answer: "You know I'd be happy in 1960 if only I had a bit more money coming in so that I didn't have to worry constantly about pinching pennies and scraping along. Oh, I'm not interested in the luxuries of life. But I'm weary of those bills that keep coming in and never seem to get paid and all of the debts that keep growing. I have enough to get by, and I never seem

to have a little extra so that I can take my wife out to dinner and the theatre. I know that money isn't everything, but when you haven't any, you know all too well that it's something".

Turning to a fourth person, this person might respond to our question by saying this: "I'd be happy in 1960 if only I had relief from the one anxiety of my life. You see, my son's an alcoholic and he's never out of my mind." Or "my daughter and her husband aren't getting along, and I'm worried as to what's going to happen to their marriage." Or "I'm not getting ahead in my work. I'm worried as to whether I'll ever make it. And I'd be happy in 1960 to have a bit of relief from this worry....just a bit of encouragement, a glimmer of hope to let me know that at least I'm going in the right direction".

Well I could go on and mention other things that would make some of you happy in 1960, but rather than do this, I'm going to pause at this point and just spend a few minutes reflecting upon some of these things I've suggested to you. Our reflection will be in the form of three observations that came to my mind as I thought about these things this past week.

The first observation would be this. In each instance, the desired thing that would bring you happiness is dependent upon something that you can have, and here I would emphasize the word have. You can have love and affection and companionship. You can have health and money and freedom from anxiety. All of these things are things that you can have. And I raise this thought: is your happiness dependent upon something you can have, is it entirely dependent upon something you can have?

The second observation would be this: all of these things do bring people happiness. I suppose there is always a temptation on the part of a preacher to minimize these things, and I hope I never get so far removed from human nature as to do that. I think I know enough about myself and life in general to know that these things that people can have, do bring immeasurable happiness.

As I was putting this sermon together, I couldn't but think of something I saw in the newspapers not long ago. It was a picture of the actor Pat Hingle. Mr. Hingle, as some of you know, was the star of the Broadway play of last season, entitled JB. After years of struggling in his profession, he finally made the top, and was a great success in this role of "JB". And then too, you'll remember that about six or eight weeks after the play opened, Mr. Hingle was seriously hurt in an accident. He fell down an elevator shaft and was seriously hurt. In fact, there was some talk that he would never be able to walk again. Anyway the picture that I saw of him showed him walking under his own power with the help of a cane to steady himself. A few lines under the picture said something like this that Mr. Hingle hoped to return to the stage very soon in another role. You could see the happiness on his face because his health was coming back, and because he would soon be back doing the one thing that he loves to do more than anything else in the world. The point is that these things do bring people happiness.

We have seen a widow scraping along on almost nothing, left a small legacy and we know what happiness it has brought her. We have seen people struggle along for years in their chosen field without any sign of encouragement suddenly receive a break and achieve success. We know what happiness it brings. We have seen people fall in love and get married after they had given up hope of anything like this ever happening to them, and we know what happiness it has brought into their lives. The point is that things of this nature - love, health, money and freedom from

anxiety do bring people happiness, immeasurable happiness, a happiness that must never be underestimated.

Having said this, I would then offer a third observation. We would do well to remember however that a happiness that depends entirely on the things you can have is bound to be, to a certain extent, impermanent and transient. It's well to remember that time can take away very quickly many of the things that it brings. Happiness today can be turned into grief almost overnight. And this too - you can become so accustomed to the things you have, things like health and success and money and love, that they no longer make you happy the way they once did. It was Bismarck who once said: WHEN I COUNT UP THE MOMENTS OF REAL HAPPINESS IN MY LIFE, I DO NOT BELIEVE THAT THEY ADD UP TO MORE THAN 24 HOURS IN ALL. Certainly if fame and fortune, success and power, money and health could make anybody happy, he should have been happy. And so let me bring this section of our thinking together by suggesting this thought to you: if the only happiness there is depends entirely and solely on the things that a person can have (things like those things we have been talking about) then it seems to me that the chances for happiness in this world are at best somewhat precarious, somewhat uncertain and unsure.

JESUS AND HAPPINESS

Moving off now in a somewhat different direction, I should like to spend the remainder of our time, considering some of the things that Jesus had to say about human happiness. Sometimes we are apt to miss or overlook those things he had to say because of the fact that in our English translation of the Bible, the word "happiness" is translated as "blessed". Jesus had quite a little to say about happiness and for the most part his thoughts are to be found in the Sermon on the Mount, in that very familiar section which Mr. Moody read so beautifully for our scripture lesson, in that section that some of you know by heart - the Beatitudes. Jesus, of course, was talking about happiness on a far deeper level than most of us are accustomed to. I don't think he was talking about an essentially different thing, but rather the same thing - deeper down, closer to the heart of things.

WHO ARE THE HAPPY ONES? Jesus would say - not necessarily the aggressive and the rich, not necessarily the married or the successful, not necessarily the privileged and the educated, the proud and the healthy. Jesus would say that the happy ones are those who are humble in spirit, who are seekers after righteousness, who are gentle, forgiving, understanding, those who are pure in heart and who are peace-makers, those who are steadfast in the face of evil opposition. To such as these happiness comes naturally and unawares, without formula, fuss or fanfare. It finds us when we fulfill certain conditions. We don't go out looking for it.

These conditions set forth in the Beatitudes have been uniquely interpreted for us by a modern writer. His name is Fulton Oursler and you're familiar with some of his books. But in his book THE PRECIOUS SPIRIT he interprets the nine beatitudes of Jesus as eight rules of mental health and happiness. They're quite good and I'd like to read them to you here this morning.

"Blessed are the poor in spirit" - This becomes "we will never be content with anything that we do" In other words, we will always be seekers. Arrogance, conceit and smug, self-satisfied complacency makes happiness impossible.

"Blessed are they that mourn" This becomes "we know that in grief and tragedy we can grow strong." "Dedicated sorrow is an open door to a new experience of strength and joy"

"Blessed are the meek". This becomes "We will accept misfortune in good faith". That is to say that happiness comes neither by submission nor by rebellion before the rough events of life, but by our acceptance and use of these things. We must be careful not to interpret meekness as weakness. It is the recognition that life is governed by wise and just laws and includes a willingness to cooperate with these laws.

"Blessed are they which do hunger and thirst after righteousness". This phrase means that we should have an unquenchable interest in knowledge and truth. It makes us stop and think because we hunger for so many, many things. Some of us hunger for power and prestige, applause and recognition. Our appetite for sex, food and drink, influence and attention are enormous. Happy people are never satisfied with such as these and with what they know. They're always seeking goodness and truth.

"Blessed are the merciful". This beatitude becomes, "We will keep clean of grudges. Hate and anger tend to cause diseases of the mind and body. When we persist in feelings of bitterness and envy and jealousy toward others, we are merely forcing unhappiness upon ourselves. The happy person is he who can overlook little slights and who can forgive larger offenses.

"Blessed are the pure in heart". What does this mean. Mr. Oursler puts it this way. It means that we will have a goal and pursue it faithfully. Singlehearted attachment to some worthy work or some lofty purpose is pureness of heart and it brings happiness. Achievements do not matter as much as goals. What about the goals you have set for yourself in 1960? Are those goals big enough to absorb your total personality. If you do achieve them, will they bring you joy and peace?

"Blessed are the peacemakers". This means that "we will do more than is required to do. The happy person never lives just for himself. He does more than he is expected to do. Happiness comes to those who lose themselves in doing things for others.

"Blessed are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake, and blessed are those who are reviled". According to Mr. Oursler the 8th and the 9th Beatitudes belong together. What is to be said for those who are reviled and persecuted? "We will learn the true values of obstacles and even of viciously unfair treatment. In other words, even injustice and persecution have a constructive value. Happy is the person who is not crushed by them, but who rises above them. He is greater than his persecutors and is always victor.

SUMMARY OF THESE THINGS

We're grateful to Mr. Oursler for his translation of the Beatitudes of Jesus. And I can't help but feel that if we were to seriously follow some of these thoughts as we enter into the work of another year, that we would experience a great deal more joy and happiness than we did in 1959. These conditions, mind you, can be met by any person - regardless of age, circumstances or environment. Above all else, remember this that human happiness is determined not by what goes on on the outside, but rather by what goes on in the inside. I think that's worth repeating,

and if you remember nothing else from this sermon than this one thought then at least I think you will have gained something. Human happiness is not determined by what goes on on the outside, but rather by what goes on in the inside. The happiness that Jesus was talking about is not the result of anything that you have, but of something you are and do. And yet the strange thing is this that while this happiness is not the result of anything that you have, yet you do have something as a result of what you are and do!

You ask "what is it that you have?" It's hard to put into words. Jesus put it this way "You have the Kingdom of heaven." The Kingdom of Heaven. Think of it, and turn it over in your minds. I think it's true even today that whenever and wherever these conditions suggested by the Beatitudes are faithfully followed and practiced, there is the Kingdom of Heaven. I hope and pray that you may find and experience like you never have before, this kingdom of heaven in 1960.

LET US PRAY: As we move into the days and weeks of another year, HELP US, Our Father, to lift our eyes to the happiness that is above the common level so that we may become people who have within themselves those qualities that are real, those qualities that enrich and transform, those qualities that bring last happiness. We ask this in the Spirit of Christ. Amen

I would just like to take this opportunity to express a very warm and friendly word of greeting to the visitors worshipping with us here this morning. We're very happy to have you with us, and we hope that you will take a moment before you leave to sign our Guest Book. We have friends from far and near because they have taken time to do this, and we hope you will do the same. And then too we would invite you to come to our Coffee Hour. We have this delightful occasion of fellowship every Sunday following the service of worship. It provides us with an opportunity to greet old friends and also to make some new friends. If time permits, we hope you will come to the coffee hour.

The announcements concerning the various activities of our church program are listed for you in the church bulletin. I trust that you will take a moment to review the announcements before you depart from the church this morning. You will notice from the bulletin that both the Young Adults and the Woman's Society have meetings scheduled for this week. The Young Adults meet this evening and the Woman's Society meets tomorrow evening. New members are always welcome at these gatherings.

Two announcements not listed in your bulletin that I would take time to mention. Books are available for your advance study of Africa for the CHURCH WIDE SCHOOL OF MISSIONS which is scheduled for January the 26th and 27th. We hope that you will take a moment or two at the coffee hour this morning to browse at the AFRICA table which will display books which are available on a loan basis for you to use.

The other announcement has to do with the Buffet Supper to be held this Friday evening at the Deaconess Association. Tickets are available and may be secured from the church office, or through any of the people living at the Deaconess Home.