

The Pursuit of Happiness

A Sermon Preached by Christopher A. Joiner
First Presbyterian Church, Franklin, Tennessee

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4th Sunday in Ordinary Time (Year A)

Matthew 5:1-12



It is right there in the founding documents of our nation, that human beings are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, and that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness.

It is the pursuit of happiness in the form of material wealth that has proven the engine to run the American capitalist economy. Every Christmas we are reminded of this pursuit and its importance to our economic life by the innumerable reports on Christmas sales in various consumer sectors. Many of us watch the stock market's ups and downs, knowing that the ability to retire with a certain standard of living depends upon its success.

A survey of advertising, which we will see on grand display in a week with the Super Bowl, reveals the various appetites that make up the pursuit; advertisements that both mirror and inform the desires we feel.

The pursuit of happiness finds its way into our domestic lives as well, quite apart from our material wealth. I said to my children more than once as they were growing up, "I just want you to be happy. I don't care where you choose to live, or who you choose to marry – or if you marry at all – or how much money you make. I just want you to be happy." (A little aside...be careful what you say to your children, or you may wake up and find them all living in Asia). But, they are happy, and that's the most important thing. Right?

The worst thing a spouse can hear is the other spouse say, "I'm just not happy." How many marriages or other relationships break apart on the rocks of discontent? How many family court judges hear the equivalent of, "I woke up one day and realized I was unhappy?"

The pursuit of happiness. To read the founding documents of our nation, to witness the life of our people, is to recognize its importance.

Happiness was important to Jesus as well. In Matthew's Gospel, it is the topic that serves as the preamble to the constitution of the church – the Sermon on the Mount. Here at the very beginning of the sermon, Jesus pronounces a series of blessings. "Blessed..." he says. And many translations of the Greek render it, "Happy..."

A few years ago I heard one half of a cell phone conversation between a father, standing behind me in the checkout line, and what I assume was his son on the other end of the call. They go back and forth, but the gist of it went something like this: Father – "This is not a smart decision." Silence. "Have you thought about how much it is going to cost?" Silence. Then the universal parent response to children's off-the-wall ideas, "You know I'm not paying for any of this." More silence. Then, in exasperation, "There's more to life than happiness..."

If there is, I don't know what it is. If you conduct a poll and ask the average American what it is she or he wants, a huge percentage will give you some version of "happiness."

So I think the dad was probably heading down the wrong road trying to convince his son that happiness is a kind of second-tier human pursuit – it won't be convincing, because every advertisement, every politician, every work of art, everything about our existence points to precisely the opposite – we long for happiness. The question is not the fact of happiness, but what makes for true happiness.

That's why it is easy to get tripped up on the Beatitudes. If we read them as Jesus' guide to happiness in just nine easy steps, we can easily fall into a trap.

The trap is hearing these blessings as a call for me to earn my place in the kingdom, to work for my happiness until I achieve it. "Blessed are the poor in spirit," says Jesus, and I'm immediately wondering if I am humble enough. "Blessed are the pure in heart," and I'm questioning my holiness. "Blessed are the peacemakers," and I'm thinking I really should not have cut off that guy on Mack Hatcher the other day in retaliation for him cutting me off on Highway 96.

It is easy to fall into the trap of hearing these blessings as something other than what they are – blessings – words that Jesus speaks over those who hear him, those who dare to follow him. "Blessed *are* you," says Jesus. Not "I will bless you *if...*"

It is clear that Jesus is speaking to his disciples here, his church, and not to the world in general. Note earlier where he gathers his disciples close in – these are words for the church, the colony of the kingdom, those who dare to follow the One who speaks to

them. Happy are you, says Jesus, who are part of this band of disciples, those who are marked by righteousness, peace, humility. The world may look on you as if you do not count, the world may pursue happiness in a lot of other kinds of ways. But you, you are truly blessed, you are truly happy, you are among the people that see the world upside down, which is to say, right side up.

Jesus has called his disciples to follow him. He has announced that the kingdom of heaven has come near in him. Now he blesses their choice, reminding them that the community formed around him is nothing less than a colony of the kingdom of heaven, what our Book of Order calls “an exhibition of the kingdom of heaven to the world.” And the kingdom itself is the goal of human existence, the pursuit of which brings happiness.

Jesus speaks to those of us who have taken on his way in the world. To take on this way is to recognize we are not able, by our own strength, to do what he calls us to do. We are dependent on the grace which we ourselves have received. We are poor in spirit. If you are, says Jesus, you are truly happy, for yours is the kingdom of heaven.

To take on this way is to mourn the fact that the world is not yet what God intends. It is to wake up each day and read the news with a degree of sadness that our existence remains broken, that there are wars and rumors of wars, that mistrust reigns, that vulnerable populations suffer, and that we are divided among ourselves, each bearing responsibility, each looking to heaven in lament. If you are among these who care enough to mourn, whose eyes are wide open, you are truly happy, says Jesus, for you will be comforted.

To take on this way is to walk in the world with a meekness that stands out. It is to recognize that we do not have all the answers, and that the only appropriate posture is humility. It is to refuse to engage in the character attacks and demonization of the other that marks so much of our common life. It is to stand out not for our brashness, but for our kindness. If you are among those who walk with meekness, you are truly happy, says Jesus, for you will inherit the earth.

To take on this way is to be merciful. It is to recognize that we have received from God a mercy undeserved, and to extend that mercy to others. Whether within the walls of our homes, or in our communities, or in the far-flung corners of the world, to take on this way is to forgive and reconcile. If you are among the merciful, you are truly happy, says Jesus, for you will receive mercy.

To take on this way is to hunger and thirst for righteousness. It is to long at a visceral level for the righteousness – the justice – of God. It is to look for it, and when we

see it to join it. It is to call for it in every aspect of life. If you are among those who hunger and thirst for justice, you are truly happy, says Jesus, for you will be satisfied.

To take on this way in the world is to be pure in heart. As one theologian said, "Purity of heart is to will one thing." If you long for the kingdom of God, if that is the one thing you will, and if you align your vision and actions to correspond to that longing, you are truly happy, says Jesus, for you will see God.

To take on this way in the world is to be a peacemaker. It is to recognize that the vision of shalom, the vision of peace and wholeness for the world, is not a pipe dream, but a very real possibility. If you are among the peacemakers, says Jesus, you are truly happy, for you will be called children of God.

If you look at the Beatitudes closely, you see the blessing of the kingdom of God. The secret to happiness is to live a life of vulnerability, for what else is meekness, mercy, peace, and righteousness than a posture in the world of openness. To follow Christ without fear is to walk this path of vulnerability. It might, it often does, result in persecution, as the final blessing points out. And yet, it is the only path that leads to true blessedness, true happiness, far beyond what the world gives.

The kingdom of God has drawn near in Jesus. We need not fear. We need not struggle and strain for a happiness that does not satisfy. We already have all we need. We have the blessing of Jesus. We have the path before us of mercy, humility, and peace. Let us embrace the gift. Blessed are you. May you and I be a blessing to the world. Amen.