

“Inclined to Joy” GPPC 2-12-17
Deuteronomy 30:15-20, Matthew 5:21-37

A few months ago, I caught part of a report on NPR. The person being interviewed had done research and produced a book on the subject of happiness. She discovered that our happiness level, as you might expect, is influenced by many factors. A great part of our day to day happiness level is related to our genetics. Yep. Some people are naturally happier than others. (I hate that. Don't you?) And there are other factors beyond our control as well. But, she said, happiness is also something we choose. And the author made a statement that really struck me. As I recall this is what she said, “Our reality is what we choose to attend to.” In other words, our reality is what we choose to focus our thoughts upon, invest in, and spend time on. So it would be good to choose wisely, wouldn't it?

In Matthew 5:21-37, Jesus lifts up four examples of “better righteousness,” how we are to live more faithfully and to choose more wisely. (If you want to continue reading, there are two more examples in verses 38-48.) In each case Jesus points out a traditional way of

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interpreting and living scripture, “You’ve heard it said that…” And then he gives an alternate way of interpreting and living that is more challenging, and, in a couple of cases, even seems to be impossible.

Jesus begins with anger. He says, “You’ve heard that ‘You shall not murder, because you’ll be accountable for judgment.’ But I say if you’re angry at your brother or sister, you’ll be liable to judgment. And if you insult your brother or sister, you’ll have to answer to the council, and if you say, ‘You fool,’ you’ll be liable to the hell of fire.”

Wow! This one gets us, doesn’t it? We live in such an angry time. In the name of “not being politically correct” we are encouraged to abandon basic human courtesy toward others. And who in here has never gotten angry at somebody? Who has never called somebody a nasty name? We’re all guilty, right? Even Jesus was known to call people names. He called Herod “that fox.” He called some folks “a brood of vipers,” and he called the scribes and Pharisees “hypocrites,” and said they were like “white-washed tombs.” So Jesus’ teaching here seems not just difficult but impossible.

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So what is he saying? He is saying that what is in our heart is just as important as our actions. What's in our heart, inevitably influences our words and deeds. So it's vital that we pay attention to anger sloshing around in our heart, because when we are angry we are committing murder in our hearts.

And with his language about "your brother or your sister," Jesus appears to be especially concerned about relationships within the church. Are we angry with each other? Do we nurse anger against each other? It is deadly and God holds us accountable.

So, we say, "Wait a minute, Jesus! You don't understand. I have righteous anger. This person deserves my anger." Well, maybe so. But the problem is much of what we become angry about is petty in God's eyes. And we tend to hold on to our anger for weeks, months, or years.

But Jesus offers a solution. He says, "When you bring a gift to the altar, if you remember your brother or sister has something against you, drop everything, go and be reconciled to your brother or sister, then go and offer your gift." In other words, "If we have a conflict with a brother or sister, go and be reconciled to him or her, and *then* worship God."

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In the church it's easy to let our disagreements become an excuse to be angry with each other and to hold onto that anger. But that's not God's will for us. That's why Jesus uses such vivid exaggerated language of "being liable to judgment," "being liable to the council," "being liable to the hell of fire," "being thrown into prison." He wants us to see just how serious our anger is; it's deadly to us as individuals, deadly to us as a church, and deadly to us a country and world.

Sometimes we can avoid anger in the first place by adopting a different approach to people. A speaker at Harvard University recently encouraged graduates to go through life with a set of questions. One of those questions was, "Wait. What?" If somebody says something we disagree with or something that hurts us or starts to make us angry, we can respond with, "Wait. What?" Instead of immediately launching into defensiveness and anger, we can stop ourselves; ask the other person for clarification. Make sure we better understand before responding. "Wait. What?" As somebody else put it, "Be curious, not furious."

It's also encouraging to see so many people in our congregation who work through disagreement in a constructive way. For example,

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you have a disagreement or get upset with another church member.

What do you do? You talk it over face to face, forgive each other, and move on. Likewise, some of you do not agree with everything spoken or written by your pastors, (shocking, but true). You could become furious and stomp around or quit church. But you don't. I admire how one of you, who sometimes disagrees with me, meets me at the door after worship and says, "You always make me think." Some of you will tell me when you agree and when you disagree. Some of you will even get angry, and then talk it through and then get over it. Anger is deadly. So we seek reconciliation. "Wait. What?" "Be curious, not furious."

Then Jesus talks about lust. He says, "You've heard that it was said, 'You shall not to commit adultery,' but if you look at a woman in order to lust after her you've committed adultery in your heart." And like his warning about anger, Jesus adds some hyperbole to bring home the seriousness of his point. He says, "If your right eye causes you to sin, tear it out and throw it away. Same thing for your right hand, get rid of it. Better to lose a member than go to hell."

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But lust, like anger, feels impossible for us to avoid, because we are sexual beings. We're hardwired to be sexually attracted to each other. It's normal and healthy and good and beautiful. And there's nothing wrong with admiring how gorgeous other people are.

So what is Jesus saying? He's warning against lust which is different from mere admiration. As one scholar says, "The Greek word translated as 'lust' can also mean 'covet,'..." (Lisa Wilson Davison in *Feasting on the Gospels: Matthew, Vol. 1*, 101.) So when we lust we're not simply enjoying someone's beauty. Instead we're focusing on how we might acquire another person as a thing for our use.

Some recent movies really explore what drives this sin. In the movie entitled, "Her," a man develops a "love" relationship with his computer whose voice is provided by the sultry Scarlett Johansson. In the movie *Ex Machina*, a computer genius creates robots who look just like beautiful women, but, of course, who do his sexual bidding without any emotional attachment on his part or theirs and without any of the nuisance of actually having to build and maintain a loving relationship. The same principle applies to that old science fiction movie

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“Westworld,” now being redone as an HBO TV series. By the way, all of these movies end badly, very badly.

What the movie producers see is that within us, broken human beings that we are, stirs a sinful desire not for loving sexuality with all of its responsibilities and attachments and affection, but for sexuality that merely uses others as objects. And once human beings are reduced to objects, then sexual, physical, and emotional abuse of them is not only permitted but encouraged without remorse.

But Jesus sees things differently. He declares that every person is a child of God, created in the image of God, deserving of respect and compassion and tenderness. And our human sexuality is meant not to objectify others but to magnify our love for each other. Our sexuality is intended to deepen our relationships, not cheapen them. So make love not lust.

Then Jesus turns to divorce. Notice he does not outlaw divorce, and in his patriarchal culture, he assumes only men can initiate divorce. Women divorced by their husbands and unable to be taken in by a

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family member were in deep trouble indeed. So Jesus seems to be concerned about protecting women, in particular, from being harmed.

Today almost half of our marriages end in divorce. A few folks are casual about their commitments, but most people agonize about the decision to end a marriage. And they do not need more guilt to be heaped upon them. After all, some marriages have become not merely difficult but destructive. In those cases, divorce may be the better of two difficult options, and divorce may actually be a step towards healing.

For now, we do premarital counseling. We teach communication techniques. We encourage couples whose marriages are suffering to go for professional counseling sooner, rather than later. Yet we still know that some marriages will end in divorce. And though Jesus calls remarriage adultery, we believe this is his way of trying to protect people, especially women in his time who would have been most vulnerable.

So we believe people should be given another chance to build a good marriage. As one scholar says, “Marriage is intended to be a communion between two people that expresses, in their mutual fidelity,

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the faithfulness of God. It is intended to be a place of safety, nurture, and honor for persons.” (Thomas G. Long, *Matthew*, 60.) That’s what we hope for all married people.

Finally, we hear Jesus’ warning about swearing oaths or vows. Apparently, people would routinely swear promises in the name of heaven, or by the throne of God, or by some other means. And by throwing in this extra verbiage, it was as though they were saying, “I’m promising, and because I’ve added these extra oath words, this time, I *really* mean it.”

Well, we can see how disastrous that would be. Imagine living in a world in which you never knew whether other people were lying. They pretended that facts and the truth didn’t matter or that they would only keep the truth when they added extra words, “I swear by (fill in the blank).” Can we imagine the chaos this would create?

Of course, we still take oaths when we become U.S. citizens or join the military or become lawyers or take political office or testify in court and so on, more as a kind of formal public promise. But Jesus seems more concerned to prevent people from playing fast and loose

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with facts and with the truth. Jesus says, “Tell the truth. Just tell the truth.”

So we have the four teachings that seem to make life harder, not easier. At one time, we could check off the boxes on our spiritual inventory and feel proud. Haven’t murdered anybody—check. Haven’t committed adultery—check. Still married—check. Made oaths and kept the ones with the best verbiage--check. But Jesus pushes us to go deeper. He calls us away from anger, away from lust, away from throwaway or destructive marriage, and away from falsehood.

Where is he leading us? He is leading us toward better lives, because when we treat each other with respect and love and truthfulness and integrity, what follows is a kind of community that’s not merely happy. No. It is actually deeper than that. It’s joyful. It is a community that experiences a kind of gladness and purpose and harmony that is a foretaste of heaven itself.

Nobody does this perfectly. And no community does this completely. But Jesus is pushing us toward something greater,

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something richer. And by God's grace the inclinations of our hearts are shaped toward love and we take steps toward joy.

You have heard that it was said...But I say to you...Joy.

Let us pray. Lord of our lives, we are your children, made in your image, precious to you. We want to follow you, but you know we stray. Do not let us despair in our failures, but lead us back every day that we might be the people and the community you desire, and that we might know the joy you offer. Through Christ our Lord. Amen. ©Jeff Paschal