

“A Strange Path to Joy” GPPC 5-6-18
Psalm 98, John 15:9-17

I’m going to ask you a question. And the answer to the question is so obvious and so universal you’re probably going to think it’s a silly question. But I’m going to ask it anyway. Who here today wants to be happy? Please raise your hands. And if you have children or grandchildren, do you want them to be happy? Of course you do. We want to be happy and we want our families to be happy. Heck, we might even want the whole world to be happy. And so we spend a good bit of our time and energy seeking happiness.

How’s that going?

There are many paths, you know.

There’s our love affair with sports. According to one report, in 2016 Americans spent \$100 billion on sports. \$56 billion went for sporting events, and this includes “tickets, transportation, and food and beverage.” We spent \$33 billion on sporting equipment, and \$19 billion on gym memberships (some of which were actually used).

(Marketwatch.com) Now imagine the number of hours we spent watching

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sports, engaging in sports, taking kids to sports. Through sweltering July, January blizzards, April monsoons, groggy early mornings, and bleary-eyed late nights--many of us will make almost any sacrifice for sports. We put up with coaches who scream and yell and cuss at us or our kids or somebody else's kids. And we build zillion dollar sanctuaries, um, I mean stadiums for sports.

I'm part of it and many of you are too. But if we're not careful, sports become an idol. If our commitment to sports is higher than our commitment to the God we know in Jesus Christ, then sports have become our gods. As theologian Paul Tillich warned, whatever has become our "ultimate concern" is our god. But put into proper perspective sports are a path to happiness.

There are others.

In a recent New York Times column with the charming title "Brunch Is for Jerks," David Shaftel says many of the young folks of New York City have lately turned Saturday and Sunday brunch into all-day occasions of excess. Apparently, customers come into the restaurants and eat and drink from late morning until early evening.

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Chefs use up the week's leftovers to produce some sort of thrown together concoctions. The customers treat the servers rudely and the servers respond in kind. And at the end of the day the ultra-cool young adults finally stagger out of the place over-stuffed and drunk.

Now I'm not picking on people for relaxing and eating (which I love to do) or drinking (I drink in moderation). But are these folks really satisfied by the all day long brunch experience that's a poor replacement for true Sabbath-keeping? To hear Shaftel tell it, probably not.

What path do we take to happiness? Some folks look to government—Democratic or Republican politics--for happiness. And certainly our faith should influence which policies and politicians we support. But if we believe that our ultimate happiness is going to be found in government in general or in a political party or politician in particular, we are going to be disappointed. A lot.

What about discovering happiness by spending time in nature? Great idea. Let's take a walk by the creek or head to the mountains or go to the beach. It's such a powerful way of feeling God's presence, isn't it? It makes us happy—for a while.

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How about achieving success in order to find happiness?

Absolutely. Social scientists who have studied happiness say that when we're successful at something—a project that went well, a good grade we've earned, a promotion, an award we've received, you name it—we really ought to bask in the moment, truly enjoy it. Do a victory lap.

Relish what we've achieved. Yay! But, the social scientists also warn us to realize that this moment will not last forever. Our success is probably not going to be as life-changing as we imagine. So we celebrate and then move on.

Well what about sex, drugs, and rock and roll for happiness. Well, drugs are out; they'll kill you. Sex is good—one of God's great gifts when used responsibly. Rock and roll—okay, I'm in. But sometimes I wonder if the elaborate light shows, drama, and deafening volume is a way of trying to create a sense of awe, a feeling of the divine, instead of actually trying to connect with the divine.

Who wants to be happy? We all do. Nothing wrong with that. Go for it.

But then Jesus actually offers us something even better.

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In the 15th chapter of John's gospel Jesus speaks to his disciples. And, as it is so often in John's gospel, Jesus does not speak in a simple linear fashion. "We went to the grocery store. We bought bread, peanut butter, and grape jelly. We came home and made peanut butter and jelly sandwiches." No. He speaks in a sort of a winding, circular way that we'll try to simplify without making it simplistic.

Jesus says to the first disciples and to us, "God loves me, and I love you. Abide in my love. In other words, participate in my love. How? By keeping my commandments. And the greatest commandment, of course, is that you love each other as I have loved you. And nobody has greater love than to lay down his or her life for his or her friends."

Clear enough so far, right? Jesus links our love for him with obeying his commandments. And he links the greatest love that comes when we lay down our lives for others, just as he did for us.

We know about laying down our lives for others, of course. This is the language used so often of our military personnel who literally give their lives for our country. Surely then, our elected representatives will only enter into war when there is no other choice. And surely we will

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insist that our military personnel will be properly cared for when they return from battle and they will not be abandoned, right? We also know of others: police, fire fighters, rescue workers, and sometimes teachers, laying down their lives for others. How might we be supportive of them?

But here's the thing, we don't tend to think of "laying down our lives" as simply a part of following Jesus in love and loving others, even though Jesus talks about this more than once. Maybe we are not challenging ourselves enough with what it means to follow Jesus. Maybe we forget that laying down our lives might not come with one dramatic moment; it might be something parceled out over a lifetime of sacrifice.

Jesus says, "When you keep my commands you move from just being a servant to being a friend. And I've chosen you, friends, to go and bear fruit. In other words, I've chosen you to do something wonderful with your lives as you love each other."

And to sum it up, Jesus says, "I've told you these things so that my joy may be in you, and that your joy may be complete."

Can we follow the movement? We are loved by God and Jesus. We respond by trying to keep the commandments, especially the

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commandment to love, and particularly when we lay down our lives in love for each other. And when we live in love and bear fruit with our lives we experience joy.

A couple of things. First, there's nothing wrong with happiness but joy is actually greater than happiness. When the Apostle Paul is in prison and he writes letters to the churches, he often says he is feeling joy. By that he does not mean simply happiness. What he means is a deeper sense of fulfillment and gladness that comes as he seeks to align his life with God's will.

Second, unlike mere happiness, joy is linked with obedient love. Joy is linked to fruitfulness and service. Some of the saddest people in the world are people who are self-absorbed. "Life is all about me. What's in it for me? Enough about you, let's talk about me."

But the most joyful people in the world are people who realize their purpose in life is to serve Christ by serving others. And the more they get into service, the more joyful they become. I'm not saying it's easy. It isn't. And we are sometimes resistant to this service. But when we can allow the Spirit of God to work in us and move us outside

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ourselves to serve Christ in the church and in the world, amazing and joyful things can happen.

Two stories. Twenty something years ago, I was serving a small faithful urban congregation. I recall another, larger church in the city. This was a strong Presbyterian church with excellent worship and outreach. But one year the church's leadership group (what we Presbyterians call the session) adopted a budget, but then the congregation did not provide all the pledges to meet that budget. This was pretty upsetting to this prominent congregation.

Now the session could have met and decided to cut mission giving and get rid of staff to balance the budget. They could have done that. Instead, the session met and they prayed and they talked and everybody on the session, every single person, decided that they would make a public promise to give a ½ tithe to the church, 5% of their income for the year. They said, "This is what we are doing as a response to God's goodness to us and our commitment to the ministry of this congregation. Now, we invite you to join us." The very next week they had all the money they needed for that church's budget.

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Another story. Many years ago when I was serving another church in another state, there was a retired clergyperson in the congregation. He and his wife were in their nineties—dear people. Eventually his wife died, and as you can imagine he was absolutely devastated with grief. The man became convinced that the retirement village where the couple lived had not done a good job in preventing his wife's death.

Now the retirement village had an excellent reputation. So maybe this was true. Maybe it wasn't. I did not know. But I knew this man was grieving and his grief had turned to anger. Again and again, I visited with him, listened carefully, acknowledged his feelings, and did not try to talk him out of them. But over time, it felt as though this man was stuck in his grief and anger. So I tried a different tactic. I basically said, "I hear your sadness and anger. But I also see you are still alive, and I believe God has a ministry for you to do here at this place. I want you to figure out what that ministry is, and when I come back to visit, I will want to hear about it."

I could see that the man was doubtful. But he agreed.

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Eventually, he became friends with a woman in the retirement village. Like him, she was in her nineties, but she was not a Christian, and she knew very little about the Christian faith. So that minister made it his mission in life to teach her about the faith. And eventually, she began to consider joining our church. So I went over to the retirement village and went through the new member class materials with her. She decided to join our church, but she was unable to travel. So our church's session voted to approve her for membership with the understanding that she would be baptized during worship at the retirement village and that some of our church members would be there as part of the service.

The day of the baptism arrived. At the appropriate place in the service, the woman and her friend rose. Both of them used their walkers to come down the aisle to the front of the chancel. There I baptized her, as she and her minister friend beamed. There were not many dry eyes in the place. But there was lots of joy.

There's nothing wrong with searching for happiness. But God in Christ offers us something richer, something more sturdy and reliable, the joy we experience as we love God through service, especially when

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we take on difficult, challenging service. This joy is available no matter where we are, who we are, or even how old we are.

What ministry might God be calling you to? How might God be calling you to experience joy? Amen. ©Jeff Paschal