

Psalm 1 (Epiphany 6 2019)
Sermon: What will it take to make you happy?
St. Mark's Episcopal Church
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What will it take to make you happy?

Marc Reklau, conducted research to answer this question for his book, Destination Happiness. A group of college professors up for tenure (a permanent post at their college) were tested to determine their happiness level. Then half the group was asked, "How happy would you be to get tenure?" The professors responded that if they got tenure, they would be very happy for the rest of their lives.

The second half of the group of professors were asked, "How unhappy would you be if you did not get tenure?" They answered "very unhappy for a long time."

Researchers went back six months later. When they retested the professors, all had reverted to their previous level of happiness whether they received tenure or not.

You and I count as our national heritage the right to life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. But what exactly is happiness? Is it a goal that we can pursue and gain for ourselves? Is it money in the bank, a diploma on the wall or a large friendship circle?

The United States is considered one **of** if not **the** wealthiest nation in the world. But we only rank 13th in happiness. Denmark is first and England is 25th. In the 1950's Abraham Maslow set out to bring a balance to psychology by studying positive psychology or what makes people happy rather than what makes people suffer. In the 1980's this became what is known as the Science of Happiness. We have discovered that happiness is elusive and hard to define or find.

7 Habits of Happiness: Relationship, Kindness, exercise, flow, spirit, strengths, and positive mind set.

So, I ask you again, "What will it take to make you happy?"

Our Psalm for today tries to address this complex question. It is the first Psalm and serves as an introduction and framework for understanding the whole book. The book of Psalms is the basic songbook for the Hebrew people. Like every songbook the hymns bring before God the people's troubles, fears, hopes, aspirations and reasons for confidence. It was written over a period of 1000 years. 73 of the 150 Psalms are attributed to King David. Its spiritual depth and beauty have made it from earliest times a resource for public and private devotion in both Judaism and Christianity. (NRSV)

Psalm 1 is a wisdom psalm (a meditation on life and the ways of God). It invites us to listen day by day to the themes, melodies and inspirations of wisdom. As we enter into the songbook, Psalm 1 tells us that there is a basic assumption underlying the whole book. The psalm tells us that there are 2 ways of life. They are variously described as: The way of blessing vs. the way of curses. The way of happiness vs. the way of woe. The way of the righteous vs. the way of the wicked or ungodly. It concludes with a final word about both of these life paths.

Psalm 1 begins with the way of the righteous. "Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers. But their delight is in the law of the Lord and on his law, they meditate day and night. They are like trees planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither. In all that they do, they prosper."

Happiness or blessings are for those who live in a certain way. The first requirement is they do not keep counsel or walk with the ungodly. This year, I have been studying the OT stories of King Saul and King David. They exemplify this principle. The people wanted a king. God heard their cries. Saul was chosen by God to be the first king of Israel. He was tall, handsome and muscular. He had the admiration of the people. But soon after he was anointed by the prophet Samuel to be king, he neglected his relationship with Yahweh. Instead of turning to God for guidance and support, and instead of being obedient to God's word, Saul did what he thought was right, if that didn't work, he turned to his military commanders, finally when things got really bad, he went to the witch of Endor for help. The spirit of God waned in Saul and he became obsessed, mentally unstable and unreliable.

God had Samuel anoint David to be the successor to Saul. David was the youngest son of Jesse. He was the keeper of the sheep. He was small and ruddy in complexion. But he had a heart after God. He struggled in his new role as the anointed. He didn't always do the right thing. He was tempted to take action against Saul. Later he lusts after Bathsheba and is responsible for her husband's death. But David always kept the counsel of the Godly. He listened to the prophets Samuel and Nathan; he sat before the Ark of the Covenant and prayed. He sought God's direction and as a result he was blessed.

The second requirement for living the righteous way is to delight in the law and meditate on its night and day. What exactly does this refer to? The word that we translate as law is torah. Capital T torah refers to the Mosaic Law, the Ten Commandments and the 613 other laws that come from the commandments as given in the first five books of the bible. Small t torah refers to God's instruction given throughout the Holy Scriptures. But specifically, the instruction found in the Book of Psalms.

To delight in God's law means to enjoy God's instructions, not because you have to but because you love to. And to meditate is not some kind of mystical vision or dreamy revelry

or even the emptying of the mind that is part of eastern religions, but it means to think on the instruction of God allowing it to shape your thoughts and actions. In fact, the word translated meditate is the same word that describes a cow chewing its cud.

In 2017 Lifeway Research conducted a survey of Christian households and discovered that 87% owned a bible and the average household has 3 bibles. Yet 35% had read none of the bible at all. 30% used it like a reference book looking things up. 22% read a little daily. And 19% read and re-read favorite stories.

The average Christian is not much of a bible student. In modern culture there are many distractions. Think about your typical day. What do you meditate on mostly? Don't tell me you don't meditate. I know you do. Do you get up and read the newspaper and then think about the sports scores to share at work? Do you read your favorite political opinion and spend the day thinking about why our world is so full of anger and division? Do you go to Facebook, Snapchat, or Instagram to see what's trending? And then think on that?

Dedication to God is more than saying "Love God, love your neighbor and love yourself." Dedication to God is a lifestyle. In Deuteronomy 6:4-9 the Israelites were directed to drill the law into the children, speak the law at home and abroad, bind the law to your wrist, write the law on the doorpost. In other words, inculcate the law in your own life and in the life of the next generation.

I have been working with my 7-year-old granddaughter, Megan, on scripture memorization. Each week we study a different passage. We begin with what it says. We read it over and over to get it in our minds. Then I ask her what does it mean? Finally, I ask how it applies to our lives. This week we studied a passage from Romans 12:18. "If it is possible, as much as you are able, live peacefully with all people." After we got it in our minds, I asked her what it means. She said, it means don't fight with other people. Then she told me about some kids that are always fighting with each other. Then I asked her how does that apply to us and she said, "If you are nice you won't cause trouble and people will like you."

3 Easy Steps: 1) What does it say; 2) what does it mean; 3) how does it apply? Whether you are 7 years old or 70 years old, the scriptures will speak to you.

The results of delighting in the law and meditating day and night are that we become like trees planted by streams of water. We do not wither but yield fruit in season and we prosper. The blessing on the righteous is not a reward, but is part and parcel of living a life within the revealed will of God. It is not a monetary blessing, but a strong character.

The second path available to us is the way of the wicked or ungodly. In the psalm the wicked are those who live outside of a covenant relationship with God. They may have

animosity towards God or simply not care about God or serve God, whether they engage in wanton disregard for God or simply neglect God, they are like chaff that the wind drives away.

The Psalm concludes with this truth: The Lord watches over the way of the righteous. The word translated “watches over” is also the word translated “knows” and conveys a deeply personal and intimate connection. Knowledge of God sustains the righteous. But way of the wicked will perish. Those who have no regard for God’s instruction are not regarded by or known to God. They can’t be sustained by God because they don’t know God.

Have you figured out yet what will make you happy? What part of your life is like a flourishing tree bearing fruit in due season? What part is like chaff, subject to being blown away by the wind? Where in the bible do you find something to delight in and what would it mean to meditate on this day and night?

There is a place to live happily under God’s blessing. It is not a psychological place of good or positive feelings. It is not a place of favorable circumstances or wealth. The place of blessing or happiness is where people are delighted to be transformed by God’s beautiful, joyful and life-giving word.