

Worthy Pursuits
Matthew 5:13-16
Rev. Jonathan Cornell
7-7-13

Our New Testament scripture reading this morning comes from Matthew's gospel chapter five, and I would encourage you to grab one of those pew bibles in front of you and turn there now, if you're following along in the red pew bibles we've made available to you it can be found on page 4 of the new testament—or you can read along on the screens above. Matthew 5 beginning at verse 13, this is from the beginning of Jesus' great sermon on the mount and these words are as applicable to the people of this nation as they are to us the community of Jesus' redeemed people. Listen carefully as we read together God's Holy Word.

“You are the salt of the earth, but if salt has lost its taste, how shall its saltiness be restored? It is no longer good for anything except to be thrown out and trampled under people's feet.

14 “You are the light of the world. A city set on a hill cannot be hidden. 15 Nor do people light a lamp and put it under a basket, but on a stand, and it gives light to all in the house. 16 In the same way, let your light shine before others, so that[a] they may see your good works and give glory to your Father who is in heaven.

This is the Word of the Lord, thanks be to God. May the same Holy Spirit that inspired the writing and preservation of these words, inspire it in our hearing this morning. Amen and Amen.

Let us pray. *Holy and Loving God we give you thanks for this nation, not only for the ground beneath our feet, but for the philosophical ideals upon which this country stands. We are the inheritors of its blessings and the world looks to us for its help and its hope. Father we acknowledge that we are a nation conceived under God. I pray now that you would open our hearts and inspire our minds through the power of your Holy Word, may it shape us so that we might shape the next generation.*

You remember from history class growing up that on June 7th, 1776 a group of men gathered together in a small room in Philadelphia to debate. They represented the thirteen different colonies, and there was no unanimity among them. The debate was hot and furious, until finally a motion was made by a man named Richard Henry Lee of Virginia that said: “I move that all thirteen colonies be free, independent states.” The resolution was seconded by John Adams. The debate continued; it was intense; and the vote finally passed with the overwhelming majority....of seven to six. It was a slim vote. It was *not* a unanimous decision by any means.

A subcommittee was then formed, headed by Thomas Jefferson, who was to write the Declaration of Independence. The Declaration was put before Congress on July 2nd, 1776, and it was ratified immediately by twelve of the states. But you needed thirteen,

thirteen out of thirteen. It had to be unanimous for it to pass. One state was holding out: New York; and New York held out for two more days. On July 4th, 1776, it was finally *unanimously* ratified. And we *then* heard these great words which became etched into American history and into your personal history and mine: “We hold these truths to be self evident....that all men are created equal....and that they are endowed by their Creator ...with certain inalienable rights....and among these, are life, liberty and the pursuit of... what?...happiness.

What more noble and honorable pursuits, right? Life to the fullest, liberty to the furthest reaches, and happiness to the very core. Heck they’re even taken directly from the pages of scripture: Life (I’ve come that they might have life to the fullest, John 10:10) Liberty: (if the Son sets you free, you will be free indeed John 8:36) Happiness: (Happy are those whose God is the Lord Psalm 33:12).

Throughout most of history beginning with the Greek Philosophers and continuing through the Middle Ages, moral actions were grounded in a pursuit of happiness. And yet nowadays the pursuit of happiness is misinterpreted. Whereas the author of scripture and framers of our land had in mind contentment, devotion and the freedom to pursue these as a community and as a nation, what we hear now as justification is, the self-interested, individualistic tag line ... “because I just have to be happy.”

But what the gospels show is that Jesus was as much concerned with teaching people how to live contented, joy-filled lives as he was with teaching parables and healing—maybe it was because happiness and laughter is a conduit for healing. In fact in Luke’s gospel it seems as though Jesus is always headed to or just coming from some sort of meal or party. But if we see Jesus’ happiness as self-serving, we dangerously miss the mark.

Happiness, and more importantly the pursuit of happiness is as natural as any human emotion or need. In fact it was Yahweh who has always given his people the passion to be free, to build and to achieve. Whether it was the Tower of Babel or the Jerusalem Temple, we have a relentless drive to use our freedom to build and achieve.

But even a glancing look reveals that God’s freedom and our definition lead to two very different results. Happiness that is self-directed almost always leads to narcissism. Recently the Atlantic ran a cover story that suggested that Facebook is actually making us less happy. At any given moment a person can look at the news feed and see hundreds of people who are either on vacation, or hanging out at a cool restaurant. And as a result we feel isolated, and unworthy. In a sense we’ve lost our vision for what true happiness is.

This week’s Time magazine focuses on the topic of happiness, and Author and Historian John Meacham has a wonderful quote about happiness, he says “Strictly personal happiness has its own paradoxes. Experience teaches us that the more aggressively we pursue it, the harder it can be to find. Whether the issue at hand is financial ambition or personal appetite, the pursuit of happiness, properly understood, is not a license to do whatever we want whenever we want if we believe it will make us happiest *right then*.”

Happiness in the Greek and American traditions is as much about equanimity as it is about endorphins. The genius of the American experiment is the nation's capacity to create hope in a world suffused with fear.

Happiness is a virtue demonstrated by those whom Jesus calls the city on the hill, in fact in the verses that immediately precede ours today Jesus spells out the recipe for happiness. And in every single one, it is the common good, not the individual that leads to greater blessedness and happiness, because every single virtue leads us into closer relationship and dependence upon one another and upon God, than it does self-reliance.

Blessed are the meek, because they will form communities of support. Blessed are the poor in spirit, because the community will rally around them. Blessed are those who hunger for righteousness, for they will find others who hunger alongside them. There's a reason Jesus calls us a city on a hill, not a castle on a hill. Because happiness comes when communities like ours, and the church in Wabash reveal that there is hope outside the loneliness of our generation. That laughter and friendship and community can be places of healing and wholeness.

But I want to make one thing very clear, because all this talk about happiness can be utterly discouraging to the person who struggles with depression or loneliness. There is a difference between happiness that comes from the absence of sadness, and there is the kind of happiness that comes from being fortified in God's loving plan no matter what obstacles come our way. It is possible to be genuinely happy in the midst of terrible hardship, because you know where meaning and purpose come from.

In our text today Jesus says, we ARE the light of the world. Light is who we are, it is our identity, but we are only reflectors of the true light. It says in John chapter 1 Jesus is light and the life of all people. So what he is saying to us is that deep and abiding meaning, purpose and happiness are rooted in our identity connected to him. The closer we draw to Christ and his purposes, the more happy we become. The more we look up to Jesus and his message of hope and transformation, rather than looking up to the billboards, message boards and televisions screens in front of us the happier we will be.

Which is why we read Psalm 121 this morning, it says I lift my eyes to the hills—where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord. Now this particular psalm is one that is a part of a collection called the Psalms of Ascent. These were, literally, the words people would say to one another as they were going up the hill, through some of the most challenging terrain in all Judea on their way to the temple in Jerusalem for worship. The journey was a challenging one, but the people would repeat these words to one another: where does my help come from? My help comes from the Lord.

The pursuit of happiness, that our declaration encourages, is always something that takes place alongside others. Jesus tells us that our identity as a city on a hill will be seen and known from all sides. So how do we pursue happiness, as God's set apart community, in a way that draws others into the kingdom of God? We draw others into the welcome and life giving life in the City of God, where we find our identity, purpose and of course

happiness. Recently I watched a TED talk by a man named Bryan Stephenson, who is the founder of the Equal Justice Initiative, a man who has spent his entire legal career seeking the thing that the Declaration of Independence espouses, justice and equity in the eyes of the law. His clients are the poor and people of color, and wrongly accused, and frequently he says being rich and guilty gets you better treatment than being poor and innocent.

Bryan is an African American from the south who went to Harvard Law, and turned down lucrative positions in law, as well as marriage and a family to serve the poorest of the poor in this way. But what would motivate a person to do such a thing? Because there is power in identity. Because of his African Methodist Episcopal upbringing, he was taught by his grandma that his identity mattered, and that when people believed who you were, that you could influence people in the most profound of ways. His life was filled with a joy that was not rooted in anything he could earn or be given to him. His joy was rooted in his identity, that was given to him, which he has now spent his entire career defending for those men and women who couldn't do it on their own.

When we give people an identity, or better, when God gives you your identity, you can do things you never thought possible, and you can do things you never thought you would do.

Happiness, or the pursuit of happiness is as important to us as Americans as any other pursuit; it's just that if our pursuit is veering off course, perhaps we need to look in a different direction. Perhaps we need to look up, up to the hills, from where our help, our identity, and our happiness come. To Jesus. Paraphrasing the words of a past president, not what God can do for me, but what we can do for others through the power of God. Because if the Lord has set us free, we will be free indeed.

Lord Jesus, you who are the way, the truth, and the life; hear us as we pray for the truth that shall make all free. Teach us that freedom is not only to be loved but also to be lived. Freedom is too precious a thing to be buried in books. It costs too much to be hoarded. Help us see that our freedom is not the right to do as we please, but the opportunity to please to do what is right. In your Holy name we pray, amen.