**Practicing Happiness**

Psalm 1  
John 17:13-16

It was probably the nicest Cinco de Mayo parade day we have ever had. The weather was absolutely perfect. It was calm, sunny and in the upper seventies. Spectators were lining the street from the start of the parade, all the way down by the Holiday Gas station on Wabasha. There have been years when it is chilly, rainy and windy. You have to get all the way up to Robert St. before you see any type of crowd. But, on this day the street was lined with people from the very beginning. You could see the smiles on the faces of children and adults as we came by with our Building Blocks Tutorial float and our puppets. I have a raccoon cap, not the Daniel Boone type, but one with the face of a Raccoon. Wearing my hat, I drive with one hand and with the other have a puppet of my own that waves to the crowd as it rests on the window ledge, leaving the appearance that the puppet, not me, is the one really heading our delegation. It was a joy filled day.

But, then we turned a corner and we came across the booth that Kathryn mentioned last Sunday in her sermon. The booth was filled with middle aged white men with large signs. The biggest sign and the one that immediately captured my attention was the sign that said, “Jesus Hates Sin”. It was like a dark rain cloud had suddenly emerged in the midst of this glorious day. “Jesus Hates Sin.” Is that annoying or what? It makes me long for those people who put out banners at baseballs games with John 3:16 written on it. I immediately started ruminating on what type of banner we should have on our float next year. It may be a bit too long, but I was wondering about something that reads, “Jesus hates people with banners that say Jesus hates sin.”

Happiness is a hard thing to hold onto. One minute the day is filled with smiling faces, warmth and sun shine. Then you turn the corner, walk into the room, pick up the phone, read the newspaper, turn on the TV, check face book, get out on the freeway and there is a dark cloud that suddenly takes the joy away. If I think about it very long, I still can get annoyed by those Jesus hates sin people with their dark rain cloud intruding on what otherwise was a joyous occasion.

How in the world does the Psalmist expect that happiness can be a way of life? How in the world does Jesus expect that joy is something integral to who we are? All it takes is something as little as a booth full of people with a Jesus hates sin sign and joy slips away into a dark cloud like a balloon accidently released from the hands of a small child. Joy and happiness are at best illusive and yet the Psalmist insists joy is something we can make a part of our lives… “Happy are those….” as the Psalmist goes on to explain how happiness is attained. According to John, Jesus speaks so that our joy may be complete. Nothing about momentary or a little taste of joy before the next disappointment or frustration or discouragement, but joy that is complete.

How is that possible? How can one possibly live with the happiness the Psalmist speaks about, the joy Jesus proclaims, when there are so many situations, so many people who would rob us of joy on a daily basis. It would be a lot easier to adopt the approach of Oscar the Grouch on Sesame Street. As you probably know Oscar lives in a garbage can and has rather low expectations when it comes to happiness in life. It is Oscar who said, “Grouches of the world unite! Stand up for your grouchy rights! Don’t let the sunshine spoil the rain. Just stand up and complain. Heh, heh, heh.” Oscar the Grouch also acknowledged, “The only time I am happy is when I am miserable.” We have all known people who have adopted this Oscar the Grouch approach to life. Some of them are conservatives who see what’s wrong with you, me and everyone else. Some are liberals who see what’s wrong with the world at every corner and every turn. What they have in common, liberals and conservatives alike, is this predisposition to only be happy when they are miserable. Unfortunately, as Oscar points out, it is a self-defeating happiness. We may not be quite so committed to unhappiness as Oscar and his fellow grouches, but we all know the illusiveness of joy, how quickly it can slip away.

It is always easier to see the flaws in someone else’s approach than our own, so I am guessing a number of you have probably already noticed the mistake I have been making with our “Jesus hates sin” people. Perhaps after church, you will come up to me with this word advice, “let it go. The parade is over. You won’t have to see them again until next year.” That would be good advice and it would be in the direction of where the Psalmist would have us go.

One of the things that feeds our unhappiness, that robs us of joy is that we meditate, ruminate, give our time and energy to that which makes us most unhappy. This is what makes Fox News and even CNN so problematic. It is a 24 hour cycle of all the things that feed our unhappiness. Similarly, someone says something or does something that makes us angry or upset and all day long we rehearse in our minds what we could have said, should have said, that sharp response that would have put them in their place. Let it go is good advice. But, the Psalmist takes us a step further. Rather than just stop meditating on the things that make us unhappy, the Psalmist encourages us to meditate on the law of God.

A quick caveat is important here. First all when the Psalmist speaks about the law of God, the Psalmist is not referring to a bunch of commandments and rules that one memorizes. Rather the law spoken of by the Psalmist refers to the love of God reflected in our personal relationships and the creation of a just society. The law has nothing to do with the mistaken notion of our Cinco de Mayo neighbors who apparently see Bible verses as something with which to hit people over the head, beating them into submission. Second, the invitation by the Psalmist is to meditate, something one can only do with an openness of heart and spirit. In short, rather than give our energy, give our time to that which feeds our unhappiness, the Psalmist encourages us to meditate on God’s love and God’s justice with an open heart and spirit. Our meditation includes being attentive to those situations and those people where love and justice are made visible.

One advantage I clearly had at the Cinco de Mayo parade is that joy and happiness was not mine alone. It belonged to the thousands of people gathered to celebrate the day. Joy and happiness was a shared experience of our delegation of puppeteers as we marched together up Cesar Chavez St. Even if I had a momentary lapse, allowing my meditations on sin haters to darken my spirits, joy was held in reserve by the people with whom I was sharing this day.

Yesterday our confirmation youth hosted a carnival here at the church. You could tell everyone was having a great time. No one person was responsible for that joy. No one person can take credit for the happiness that was experienced. It was something we shared together. If you as an individual were having a bad day or some frustration or disappointment clouded your life, joy was still there waiting for you as a gift.

How can happiness be a way of life as the Psalmist proclaims? How can joy be integral to our lives? None of us can hold onto joy by ourselves. All of us will face difficult times, difficult people, losses and heartaches. We will make mistakes, do things we come to regret. We will be discouraged by things that do not work out as we had hoped. We will be angered and frustrated by things we read in the news. No matter how hard we try to individually hold onto joy, no matter how many accomplishments we have, no matter how good our grades, how wealthy we become, how successful we are, none us are able to sustain joy and happiness on our own.

The Psalmist insists happiness as a way of life is relational. Jesus proclaims joy that is integral to who we are is relational. Here is what Biblical scholar Isamel Garcia says about our Psalm today. “Happiness and delight of the righteous consists in that personal and communal identity they gain by allowing themselves to be instructed by God’s Torah (the teaching of God’s love and justice). They know to whom they belong and see themselves as being part of a story that is larger than themselves and that bears fruit…In a world that is confused, cynical and driven to despair they live in the hope that even in the worst of circumstances God is present and creates a way out of no way. They delight and are happy because they know that the only enduring purpose belongs to God. By God’s instruction and transforming power they are able to embody the theological purpose virtues of love, faith, and hope and this is the source of their happiness.” We work for justice and care for the earth with joyful hearts because joy that lasts is relational. We find happiness in our caring for one another because happiness is relational.

This week Michele decided to clean out our fridge and pulled out a half eaten apple that had become brown and shriveled. Our joy can become like that apple. We turn the corner, encounter someone with an I hate sin sign and joy slips always, like a balloon escaping the grasp of a child. But, the Psalmist says joy rooted in our meditations on God’s love and our relationship with God and one another is like a treat planted by streams of water, which yield their fruit in its season and their leaves do not whither. In all that they do, they prosper”. Joy can be much more than a fleeting and illusive emotion. Joy and happiness can be a way of life that we practice every day.

**Psalm 1**

*Our first lesson is the beginning of the Psalms and gives us an orientation to how we should be approaching not only the Psalms, but all of Scripture. The Psalmist reminds us happiness in life is a choice that we must make. We can choose the path of rejecting the love and justice of God or we can choose the commandment that prophet’s summarize by saying do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with your God.*

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 God,  
and on God's 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. The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment,  
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; for God watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

**John 17:13-16**

*Our Gospel lesson is a remembrance by John of Jesus assurance that God’s love and hence the joy that comes from God’s is eternal. Jesus knows full well that in the world people often find short cuts to joy or seek after joy that is fleeting. The joy Jesus offer is a joy that is complete and lasting.*

But now I am coming to you, and I speak these things in the world so that they may have my joy made complete in themselves. I have given them your word, and the world has hated them because they do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world. I am not asking you to take them out of the world, but I ask you to protect them from the evil one. They do not belong to the world, just as I do not belong to the world.