

## **“Happiness and Excellence”**

Sermon by Joe Summers for January 25th, 2009 (Annual Meeting Sunday)

(Readings: Jonah 3:1-5,10, Excerpt from Martin Luther King’s final speech, Mark 1:14-20.)

I heard a commentator this week say that we are living in a new millennium and I think perhaps it is true and that it has taken us eight years of going backwards to get us ready and willing to face the challenges of this new millennium.

I have a hard time accepting reality. When 9/11 happened, I watched it on TV, again and again, but my mind still couldn’t accept it. That’s why all those stories about what happened to people were so important for me to hear over the ensuing weeks and months, as they helped me find my way into reality.

I’ve had a similar feeling the last couple of months. It just seems so unbelievable that Obama won the nomination, that he won the presidency, and that he is now our president. The masochistic side of me still finds myself almost frightened to say it. But hearing all these different folks talking about what his becoming president means to them--helps me to believe it’s true. Often I find myself crying as I listen, but it is not tears of sorrow so much as tears of joy. I feel an emerging happiness that is almost as alien as the great fears triggered by 9/11 and our government’s response to it. I want to be clear that my happiness is not about our having a black president, though that does make me happy. Up until now I would have assumed our first black president would have been some kind of token conservative meant to help reinforce the status quo by making us feel like change is happening. No, my happiness about Barack Obama’s being president is about so much more than just our country’s taking such an important step to challenge the politics of race; it’s about my feeling that Barack represents the best of who we are. At this crisis point in human history, when so much is at stake, he represents for me what Abraham Lincoln called, “the better angels of our nature”. We have seen enough of the worst angels of our nature. We have seen the disasters they have led us into. But Barack represents not just himself, a clearly extraordinary individual, but a community of people who, in the midst of decades of our being ruled by greed, cowardice, cynicism, and laziness,--worked to preserve a vision of excellence, of what true happiness is about, and what it costs. The happiness I’m feeling is that maybe the revolution of moral values that Martin Luther King was calling for when he was killed, has finally begun.

Today I want to talk about happiness and excellence.

Happiness. When we moved back to St. Louis from Massachusetts in 1963, I realized I was happy. I think I had been happy before, but I didn’t know it at the time. Every year I wished time would stop, because I could not imagine feeling any happier than I felt through 3rd, 4th, and 5th grade.

My happiness was rooted primarily in my having a small band of friends. They weren’t perfect. Rob was something of a delinquent whose proposals several times led to our being chased by

the police. Matt and Mike were twins, and Mike was something of a pyromaniac, so at least twice, the fire department was called when we were cooking meals in our back bushes. Tiger was younger, so would often get hurt, plus his dad was a policeman who was not pleased when we got into trouble with the police. No, they were not perfect friends, but they were excellent friends, and the bonds of our friendship made me feel happy. It wasn't that bad things didn't happen; terrible things did happen, but beneath it all, I felt the joy of true happiness.

My experience of those years, 1963-1966, seemed to parallel something that was happening around the world. My impressions had been that, until then, your average working person didn't really expect to feel happy, but now you had groups like the Beatles and Motown saying that working people, even poor people, could experience happiness in this life. "It's been a hard day's night, and I've been working like a dog. It's been a hard day's night, I should be sleeping like a log. But when I get home to you, I find the things that you do will make me feel all right." "Ain't no mountain high enough, ain't no valley wide enough--to keep me from getting to you." Though much of this happiness was articulated in terms of romance, I think, in retrospect, it was about something far deeper and wider, as seen in the ways that it led pop music to move into dealing with every social and political reality. And though this new music dealt with all sorts of difficult realities like: death, loss, mental illness, violence, and oppression, beneath those lyrics I felt that same underlying sense of hope and happiness that I felt in my personal life.

I am getting intimations of that kind of collective happiness once again, and it's led me to look back on the last 40 years and think about why this kind of happiness disappeared. I think the answer is very clear. There is a parallel between the lives of individuals and the life of society in terms of how the fruit of our actions effect our underlying happiness.

Greed is not only hardening, but it is deceptive.

Lying is corrosive, not only destroying our relationships with others, but also our relationship to ourselves.

Laziness leaves us less and less able to act.

Spiritual laziness is worse, as it leaves us less and less capable of taking risks and dealing with reality.

Incompetence, which is the fruit of laziness, is incredibly discouraging.

The individual or society that pursues such practices will one day face the consequences of their actions. In the meanwhile, true happiness will elude them, even if they become wealthy, even if they are the image of success, for there is a steep price for real happiness, and you cannot get there without integrity, hard work, the willingness to risk everything, and to love others with all your heart, mind and soul. Suffering is not the antithesis of happiness, it is the price. As Father Zosima warns--true love is "a harsh and dreadful thing" and yet it is what opens the door to true happiness. The path of integrity may seem like a long lonely path, yet it is the path of ultimate connection.

Just as there is a parallel between the lives of individual and societies, so too there is an intimate

connection between the lives of individuals and small communities and that of society. Each radically effects the other. Right now we're experiencing the contrast between the way collective hope and despair shapes our individual lives. But it is also the case that individuals and small communities have everything to do with what happens in the society at large. It's a little like the way individual cells affect the body. When cells are strong, they can fight off disease and illness; when they are weak, disease can spread like wildfire.

I believe we are in a time when we are being called to listen to the best angels of our natures, when we are being called back to pursuing excellence, not simply for our own sake, but for the sake of our society and our world. I'm not talking about perfectionism, I'm talking about excellence. It's clear to me I will never be able to write perfectly, speak perfectly, even dress perfectly. Despite the best I do, people come into this church and again and again say it's so nice your service is so informal. And though I'm chagrined that folks can't see how much work goes into what may appear to be an informal gathering--my own experience of the attempt to create perfect liturgies is that they don't have space for reality and, without reality, there is no authentic spirituality. Just as people coming into this chapel often seem to wonder whether maybe someone forgot to finish building it-- and yet it is a place of great beauty-- we need to stay clear that perfectionism and excellence are two very different, and usually contradictory, values.

I want to end today by looking at Psalm 84, which we read today, and simply point out how its promises of happiness speak to me both of our lives as individuals, but also of our life as this small community called the Church of the Incarnation

How dear to me is your dwelling, □ O Lord of hosts! □

My soul has a desire and longing for the courts of the Lord; □  
my heart and flesh rejoice in the living God.

The author is in the temple, or some kind of sanctuary, and what it evokes in them is a sense of the joy. The joy is not about the physical structure, but what that structure evokes in them, the joy of being in the living God, the happiness of being fully alive living in reality, rather than in the little constructions we build as an alternative to reality. It's about living in freedom, rather than under the dominion of fear or shame.

The sparrow has found her a house  
and the swallow a nest where she may lay her young;  
by the side of your altars, O lord of hosts,  
my King and my God. □

We then have this marvelous interlude, where the author notices how swallows and sparrows have built a nest on the side of the altars, and they too inspire them.

Happy are they who dwell in your house!  
they will always be praising you.

- Happy are they whose strength is in you!  
whose hearts are set on the pilgrim's way,

One of the marvelous things about Hebrew poetry is that it tends to be written in couplets, where one line informs the others. Here we get the connection between happiness and praise. Happiness leads to praise, but praise also creates happiness. Then there is this vision of what Godly strength is about; it's about having your heart set on the pilgrim's way. Again and again I fall into thinking that happiness is about making my life into some kind of well-ordered house. I get stuck on the idea that if I just get everything in place, then I'll be happy. But this says the opposite. It says that happiness lies in treating our lives like an unending pilgrimage, where we are called to treat whatever and whoever comes across our path as a potential source of Godly revelation. It's about going out into life and the world, rather than to control.

Those who go through the desolate valley will find  
it a place of springs,  
for the early rains have covered it with pools of water.□

The pilgrim's way is not one of all sunshine; no, it takes us right through the valley of the shadow of death. Yet somehow, in the midst of that desolate valley, we will be sustained by grace.

They will climb from height to height,  
and the God of Gods will be revealed in Zion.  
Lord God of hosts, hear my prayer;□  
hearken, O God of Jacob!  
Behold our defender, O God;  
and □look upon the face of your Anointed!

The pilgrim's way is about climbing from height to height; it is about moving from strength to strength. That's the revolution I'm feeling these days. Let us begin the ascent to being our better selves, our stronger selves, our more capable selves, rather than staying mired in visions that we can't do it. Yes we can!

For one day in your courts is better  
□than a thousand in my own room,  
and to stand at the threshold of the house of my God  
is better than to dwell in the tents of the wicked.  
For the Lord God is both sun and shield;□  
God will give grace and glory;

Here then we hear the reward for the vulnerability and risk taking which is living on the pilgrim's way, the reward for trying to grow in strength and power and trying our best --however inadequate that might seem. To experience the living God, even for a moment, produces more happiness than years of trying to live in our own self-created realities. To live outside on the

threshold of the tent of the living God, is better than to live in those alluring tents of the wicked. There is more grace and glory to be found out there, subject to all the elements, than there is in all the wealth, success, and power of those who have rejected the living way.

No good thing will the Lord withhold  
from those who walk with integrity.  
Oh Lord of hosts,  
happy are they who put their trust in you!

Then the punch line: “ No good thing will the Lord withhold from those who walk with integrity.” I believe integrity is one of the most important words in our time. Here we find the connection made between integrity, trust, and true happiness. Without trust we will be controlled by our fears and never find our way to integrity. Without integrity we will not find our way to true happiness.

This is the path I see this congregation trying to walk, the path of integrity, the path of trust, and I want to say that I believe this little cell has, in the process, had a significant impact on the broader body of the church and our community and through it, the world.

It may be, that despite all our efforts, we will remain a small congregation.  
It may be, that despite all we give, we will remain living close to the margins, financially.  
But we will walk with integrity, we will do our best to be a pilgrim people open to truth, open to reality and what we encounter in life. We will cultivate the kind of excellence that is the antidote to greed, despair, cynicism, laziness, and incompetence.

Like the communities that brought forth a Barack Obama, we will not simply try to survive, we will try to plant the seeds of a new heaven and a new earth, where righteousness flows like an ever flowing stream, justice rolls down like a mighty river, and love reigns over all. And in the process, I believe we will come to know true happiness.

For if we are willing, God is able; and if we are ready, God has already gone ahead to prepare a way for us. Amen.