

## “Better than Happy”

A sermon by the Very Rev. Timothy Jones

Mark 1:9-15 / Lent 1 / February 18, 2018

In those days Jesus came from Nazareth of Galilee and was baptized by John in the Jordan. And just as he was coming up out of the water, he saw the heavens torn apart and the Spirit descending like a dove on him. And a voice came from heaven, “You are my Son, the Beloved; with you I am well pleased.”

And the Spirit immediately drove him out into the wilderness. He was in the wilderness forty days, tempted by Satan; and he was with the wild beasts; and the angels waited on him.

Now after John was arrested, Jesus came to Galilee, proclaiming the good news of God, and saying, “The time is fulfilled, and the kingdom of God has come near; repent, and believe in the good news.”

I don’t want to be happy. I don’t.

Before you conclude I’ve totally lost it,

let me explain. I guess I should say

I don’t want to be *just* happy.

Because I’m looking for something deeper, more

enduring than pleasant feelings squeezed in

between life’s inevitable

hard times or ordinary days.

I don’t think you, either, want a life of merely cheery moments. Not when something more is

possible, something better. Maybe happiness isn't  
all it's cracked up to be.

Mere happy feelings don't hold up in hard times,  
for one thing. Which is behind Jesus saying in the  
Sermon on the Mount,

“Blessed are those who mourn.”

Blessed are those who *mourn*, who grieve, hurt?  
That doesn't make sense, unless that blessedness  
means a trust and grounding that holds even when  
we face unhappy circumstances.

“Blessed are those whom mourn,  
*for they will be comforted.*” That's the promise he  
gave. For when we mourn, and we are mourning  
this week after yet another school mass shooting,  
we get glimpses and help.

Today, this first Sunday in Lent, is a good time to  
have this conversation. Because it's a somber  
season. Some of us will miss the Alleluias; we  
will notice the more sober music, the starker  
appearance of our altars, the giving up of  
pleasures, fasting.

Still, for some, Lent is their favorite season.

Because we want a delight that goes beyond the routine of get up, go to work, go to bed, get up again, even if it costs us something.

We want a joy that is more durable, sturdy--  
a joy that endures and holds us.

That gets us back to the basics.

I was at a meeting of professional types looking at how to reclaim deeper meaning in midlife.

And one guy said it well:

“I realized that I needed my life to be more than growing my business quickly and writing myself a big check at the end of each year.

Because I was missing something.”

We run after the glossy, shiny things.

Maybe get inebriated by what the world says will dull our pain and satisfy our yearnings.

We get tempted to veer off course by the  
seductive calls of a wider culture  
that thinks that pleasure matters over all,  
that relationships only mean getting needs met,  
a culture whose idea of sacrifice is chipping in a  
few dollars a year for a fundraiser.

We think we want happiness but then find it's not  
compelling enough. We drive to get ahead only to  
discover that the buzz of success  
doesn't give us the buzz we expected.

We chase happiness when what we long for is joy.

The two aren't always the same.

Here are some examples:

*Happiness* is the glow of a good grade.

*Joy*, on the other hand, is the settled knowing of  
why you go to school, convinced that late nights  
of homework move you toward a future.

*Happiness* is partying hard on a Saturday football game night, so much so that when it's time to get up for church the next morning your body says,  
“Are you *kidding* me?”

But *joy*: that may mean sitting through a 70 minute worship service, hearing soaring music, listening to a living word read, and clearing your mind to listen to sermon that at least sometimes has a word of insight just for you.

Which will feed you and  
last the through a tough week?

*Happiness* is sitting on a couch gorging on nachos and watching mindless entertainment.

*Joy* is spending time with friends and family, even family members that are hard to get along with.

*Joy* is going for a run and doing core workouts with burpees and merkins, (yes, those are names for actual exercises); I wouldn't say I'm happy at that moment. But at the end of a workout, when my mind is cleared and my blood is pumping, that's joy.

Did you watch the Olympic athletes during this  
past week's games in South Korea?

I don't think I saw much happiness on the faces of  
the cross-country skiers. I saw joy there when  
they finished their race.

It takes focus, drive, hard sacrifice but when  
they're done, what satisfaction,  
even if they didn't medal.

A quest for *happiness* might have you look  
to a spouse or partner or friend  
to supply all your needs.

*Joy* is knowing that any good growing  
relationship means work and sacrifice.

Bruce Guignard once heard someone say,  
For the first ten years of my marriage I focused on  
my needs and her shortcomings.

Lately I've been focusing on her needs and my  
shortcomings,

and our marriage has never been better.

I'm sure it's never been more joyous.

We can make those shifts in Lent. Today we see that for Jesus joy was far deeper than the allure of “success” and the magic of quick-fix solutions.

In the story of Satan’s temptations, as someone wrote, Jesus “rose up from the place where the kingdoms of the world shimmered before him, where crowns flashed and banners rustled, and hosts of enthusiastic people were ready to acclaim him, and quietly walked the way of poverty and suffering to the cross.

*Helmut Thielicke*

Only by going that route did Jesus uncover the joy of obedience.

Only by going that route did Jesus move toward the profound accomplishment of securing our salvation on the hard wood of the Cross.

Only then did he experience the finale where God raised him from the darkness of the graveyard tomb and brought life out of death.

Happiness or joy. Which do you want?

And then one more thing: Happiness or *meaning*?  
That's the second question. Meaning and purpose  
matter. Jesus's obedience to his Father's purpose  
wasn't just for him. It's a pattern for us.

I once heard a guy talking about his career: "I was  
running 110 miles an hour, outrunning the people  
around me. But I didn't know where I was going."

We want more than a life of taking care of our  
random needs and whims and wants.

We want our lives to *go somewhere*.

Yes, even Jesus was tempted to step off  
the path that led him to his ultimate calling.

Satan, the devil, who appears here as suave and  
convincing, wanted to distract Jesus from the  
truer, deeper calling Jesus felt. And the  
temptations seemed so, well, sensible.

They did! *Turn these stones into bread!*

Well, there's nothing wrong  
with feeding hungry people.

In fact, there is great good in that.



Except Jesus's mission could not be exhausted by  
feeding the hungry.

He walked to the cross to make our lives new.

He gave his life that we might have life.

He couldn't short-circuit that.

You want meaning?

Start there. With what he did for you, for us.

And remember that meaning comes only when  
you have a purpose bigger than you.

When you too get out of yourself and love God  
and serve others.

A graduate student, Laura Aknin, conducted an  
experiment that helps get at what I mean. She  
came up to people on the street with a box of  
envelopes and an unusual request:

“Are you willing to be in an experiment?”

If people said yes, she asked them how happy  
they were, [jotted that down], got their phone  
number, and handed them

one of her mysterious envelopes.

When people opened the envelope, they found a five-dollar bill, accompanied by a simple note. For some of them, the note instructed: “Please spend this \$5.00 today before 5 pm on a gift for yourself or any of your expenses [like rent].”

Others found a note that read: “Please spend this \$5.00 today before 5pm on a gift for someone else or [as] a donation to charity.”

In addition, some people got ... envelopes with a 20-dollar bill rather than a five.

Armed with this extra bit of cash and their instructions ... people went on their way.

That evening, [each] received a call [from the researcher] asking them how happy they were feeling, as well as how they had spent the money.

[Here’s the thing]:

... [I]ndividuals who spent money on others ... were measurably happier than those who spent money on themselves....

The amount of money people found in their envelopes—five dollars or 20—had no effect on their happiness.

How people spent the money mattered much more than how much of it they got.

Meaning? Not where maybe you think it's found.  
Not in getting, but in giving.

I mentioned a few Sundays ago a magazine for business entrepreneurs that I saw in an airport. It had tips for how to lead with optimism during these uncertain times.

One little gem of advice was, “Use your organization as a platform for change.”

Are government officials driving you crazy?

Well, then, the article said,  
Make your organization a platform for change.

A platform, a place of influence.

I'd add, make your *life* a platform for change.

Spend more focused time with God.

Give more to others. Find a purpose.

Find your passion. Don't stay safe and comfortable. Do something hard and wonderful.

You will find divine resources precisely when you take the harder way. And there will be joy when you see the faithful course and resolve not to let anything keep you from it. There will be joy. Nothing less than joy.