

[BLANK] [PRAYER] I hope and pray that you had a good week, and that you found some joy in it. Maybe for some of us, joy was on Valentine’s Day. [CARD] My wife gave me a beautiful card, and we had a few moments to appreciate being together, and being a family. Chocolates, flowers simple gifts - we are pretty typical in what we offer each other on Valentine’s Day. It was nice to have a moment of simple happiness.

[BLANK]

Happiness. It’s such a gift to be happy, and such a gift to be happy in simple things. [PUPPY] The comic strip artist Charles Schulz came up with a way of expressing this many years ago: “Happiness is a warm puppy.” What I like about this famous picture is that the little girl, Lucy, was usually a pretty crabby and mean character, while Snoopy, the dog, was often too sophisticated for his own good. There’s nothing like a moment of simple happiness to bring out the best in us, and in others.

[BLANK] We love simple happiness - a warm cup of coffee or tea, a favorite pair of slippers, a walk down a road in a beautiful place. Happiness is so important to our American way of life, that Thomas Jefferson said, in our Declaration of Independence, that the pursuit of happiness was an “inalienable” right of Americans. To be American is to be looking for happiness, anywhere and everywhere we can. Pursuing happiness is the American way!

Of course, not all happiness is created equal, even if, as our Declaration of Independence says, all people are created equal. Happiness comes in all shapes and sizes. Some happiness is free, and easy. Some happiness is expensive, and comes at a great price. [ADS] Companies spend trillions of dollars each year to convince us to spend more money on happiness. Many of us don’t have the money to buy what they say will make us happy. Maybe that’s why so much of pursuing happiness makes us unhappy. We can get caught in an “if-then” world of seeking imaginary happiness that can make us slaves to other people’s ideas about what happiness should be.

[BEGGAR] When I worked in New York City, I would pass beggars on the streets often. I would try to always have a few dollars in my pocket, to make sure that I had something to give a person in need. One day, I passed a beggar, and I didn’t have anything to give him. I mumbled an apology to him, and the beggar replied, with two words that cut me to the heart: “Bless you.”

“Bless you.” A poor man, on a street corner on a chilly morning, with next to nothing to his name, offered me, a person with good shoes, good clothes, a house, a car, a family, good health - all of this, and more - he offered me a blessing. He gave me something that he was able to give freely, something that money could never buy: the ability to understand what people really needed in life: blessings.

Maybe our frustration in pursuing happiness is in how we use our language. Maybe what we think is true happiness is actually called something else. Maybe what that poor old man was telling me that day was that God’s language challenges us to think about what happiness really is. Maybe what God is calling us towards is not what the world calls happiness, but towards what God calls happiness. And sometimes we need to hear from

God in different ways to understand what that happiness is about.

[BLANK] Our gospel reading today came from Luke’s gospel, the gospel that we will be hearing a lot through this year of lectionary readings. Luke’s gospel challenges us in ways that are different than Matthew, Mark, and John’s gospels. You see, Luke reminds us, more than the other gospel writers, that Jesus was calling people to look not only at themselves, but at the world around them, a world that had been denied so much happiness unfairly, for the sake of power and wealth. You have to look very carefully at the words of Luke’s gospel, sometimes, to catch how Jesus was doing this. Often, in Luke, the story is in words that we might move right past.

Since last week’s readings in Luke, Jesus has called together his twelve apostles, and he has been amazing the world with his power of healing. People’s bodies, and minds, and hearts have been made whole by Jesus. People are coming from all around to hear and to see Jesus, even from foreign cities, like Tyre, and Sidon. The rich, the poor, the familiar, the foreign - they were all together one day, on a flat plain, all equal before the eyes of Jesus.

Imagine, Jesus, in the middle of this huge crowd, and, as Luke tells us, Jesus looking up at his disciples. There was only one way for Jesus to be looking up at them on a level plain: Jesus had to be below them, looking up, like a beggar looks up, at people going by him on the street. Jesus was about to tell them what happiness was all about, from the eyes of a beggar. And from that perspective, looking up at good disciples, and people just listening, rich and poor, kind, and cruel, Luke tells us that Jesus told people amazing things, things that only a beggar could see.

Jesus said, “Happy are you who are poor, because God’s kingdom is yours.” The Greek word in Luke’s gospel for “poor” meant, literally, someone who was kneeling like a beggar. Jesus was telling us, and showing us, that the beggar was the model for happiness in God’s eyes. The Greek word for “happy” didn’t mean happiness only in a human sense. It meant, more deeply, blessings - gifts from God that the world could never take away. Jesus was turning the world’s image of happiness upside-down.

Are you poor? Are you feeling like you are on your knees, in your heart, and in your life, begging for God’s blessings, God’s justice, God’s perfect love, in a world filled with false happiness? Or, are you, like everyone but Jesus in that crowd, on your feet, standing tall and proud, afraid to bow your knees before the one who gives us true happiness? Are you willing to be hungry for things that actually satisfy you forever, crying for things that will make you laugh forever, preparing to rejoice when you take it on the chin from people who hate you, and call you evil, just because you’re not willing to deny the power of a God of perfect love, who conquers all hate and evil?

Do you want to be happy; really, really happy? Do you want to have blessings from God, so many that you can give them away, even to people who won’t give you the time of day, much less a dime, as they pass you by? Do you want to feel equal to everyone else in the world, like Thomas Jefferson promised us we should be, not above, not below, but on a level plain, neither proud nor jealous, but content, and, yes, even happy with who you are,

where you are, and what you have? Do you want real justice in God’s world, justice that isn’t angry, or punishing, but justice that puts every child of God on a level field?

If this is the happiness we want, if this is that we really want in our heart of hearts, then Jesus tells us and shows us a simple point of view to help us understand how to get real happiness: be like God. Be like the God who crouched like a beggar, to teach us about real riches, and who taught us to share them with those who didn’t have them. Be like the God who hungered for righteousness, feeding real love, and real food, to real people. Be like the God who cried real tears before he died on a cross for our sake, and our salvation, so that no one ever, ever again, could be denied the chance for God’s deepest happiness.

And if this is not what you want, or what you’re willing to do for what you want, then Jesus shows us that the world has a simple plan for you. Take the easy way out. Be rich now, and poor later. Laugh now, and cry later. Accept flattery now, and face hard truths later. These blessings and curses from Jesus, like those in today’s Psalm 1 reading, follow a pattern that was familiar to people in the time of Jesus. Blessings and curses were used to seal contracts, covenants, between people. God is offering us a lasting, saving, covenant of blessings, in the words of Jesus. The world covenants with us only to offer us curses.

Today, I offer you the blessings of God, through faith in Jesus Christ. God offers them to us all equally, knowing that, like people passing a beggar on the street, we all need them equally. But we don’t all want them equally, or give them equally. Choose God’s blessings; God’s joy. Choose to be really happy, in Jesus. You will never regret it. Amen.