

## Happiness is a Choice

Deuteronomy 30:15-20

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IN TODAY'S FIRST READING, MOSES WAS ADDRESSING THE ISRAELITES WHO HAD ESCAPED THE TYRANNY OF EGYPT SOME 40 YEARS EARLIER. THEY SPENT THE INTERVENING TIME WANDERING IN THE SIDEWALK SQUARE KNOWN AS THE WILDERNESS OF SINAI. WHILE THERE, THEY HAD RECEIVED THE 10 COMMANDMENTS AND THE REST OF THE LAWS OF GOD. THIS WAS THE END OF THE LINE FOR MOSES – HIS LAST SPEECH, HIS LAST INSTRUCTION. IT WAS TIME FOR THE ISRAELITES TO MAKE CHOICES, TO MOVE OUT OF THE SQUARE. MOSES IS CLEAR ABOUT THE CONSEQUENCES OF THEIR CHOICES. BLESSINGS AND CURSES LIE ON THE OTHER SIDE OF THE CRACK IN THE SIDEWALK.

“CHOOSE LIFE,” ADMONISHES MOSES TEARFULLY. HE HAS LOVED THEM ALL THESE 40 YEARS AND HE KNOWS HOW TEMPTED THEY WILL BE TO GIVE UP AND GO ASTRAY OR REMAIN PARALYZED IN THE DESERT SQUARE. HE WANTS THEM TO WALK ON THE SIDE OF GOD AND BE HAPPY IN THE PROMISED LAND. **“YOU CAN DO THIS,”** HE ENCOURAGED EARLIER IN THIS SPEECH. **“SURELY, THIS COMMANDMENT THAT I AM COMMANDING YOU TODAY IS NOT TOO HARD FOR YOU, NOR IS IT TOO FAR AWAY,”** HE SAYS. **“YOU CAN DO THIS! CHOOSE LIFE!”**

DO YOU WANT TO BE HAPPY FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE? OVER THE LAST COUPLE OF WEEKS, WE HAVE TALKED ABOUT THE IMPORTANCE OF CLOSE FRIENDS WHO ANCHOR US AND SUPPORT US – LIKE HOBBS TO CALVIN, FRIENDS WHO GIVE US ENCOURAGEMENT WHEN WE ARE DOWN AND A SWIFT

KICK IN THE TUSH WHEN WE NEED A LITTLE CHANGE IN DIRECTION. WE ALSO TALKED ABOUT DEVELOPING A LIFELONG ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE – ABOUT HOW BEING INTENTIONALLY THANKFUL CONTRIBUTES TO OUR OVERALL SENSE OF PEACE AND WELLBEING. TODAY, AS A CONCLUSION TO THIS MID-SUMMER EXCURSION INTO THE THEME OF HAPPINESS, I WANT TO EXPLORE WITH YOU THE ROLE OF CHOICE.

MUCH, IF NOT THE WHOLE, OF THE BIBLICAL WITNESS REVOLVES AROUND THE IMPORTANCE OF CHOICES – GOD’S CHOICES AND OUR CHOICES. FROM THE BEGINNING, GOD GAVE ADAM AND EVE A CHOICE. EAT THE APPLE OR DON’T. THERE WILL BE CONSEQUENCES TO WHATEVER YOU CHOOSE. ABRAHAM AND SARAH HAD A CHOICE. THEY COULD HAVE CHOSEN TO STAY IN UR, BUT THEY PACKED UP THEIR BAGS AND WENT TO THE PLACE GOD SHOWED THEM. THERE WERE CONSEQUENCES TO WHAT THEY CHOSE. MOSES COULD HAVE CHOSEN TO IGNORE THE BURNING BUSH. JESUS COULD HAVE STAYED IN NAZARETH AND AVOIDED THE CROSS. ALL CHOICES. UNLIKE SOME OTHER RELIGIONS THAT EMPHASIZE THE ROLE OF FATE AND UNAVOIDABLE DESTINIES, THE BIBLE ASSUMES WE HAVE CHOICES. **“CHOOSE THIS DAY WHOM YOU WILL SERVE?”** COMMANDED JOSHUA. **“CHOOSE LIFE,”** IMPLORES MOSES.

AT SOME POINT IN NEARLY EVERY WEDDING HOMILY I HAVE EVER DELIVERED, I REMIND THE COUPLE THAT HAPPINESS IS THEIR INDIVIDUAL CHOICE. **“BRIDE,”** I SAY, **“YOU CANNOT MAKE HUSBAND HAPPY. YOU CAN BE KIND AND UNDERSTANDING. YOU CAN BE ATTENTIVE AND FAITHFUL. YOU CAN BE HAPPY IN YOUR OWN DEMEANOR, BUT YOU CANNOT MAKE**

**HUSBAND HAPPY. GET USED TO IT. HAPPINESS IS HIS CHOICE, AS IT IS YOURS. NOTHING HE CAN OR SHOULD DO CAN MAKE YOU HAPPY.”**

OF COURSE, ALL THIS PROFOUND, PASTORAL WISDOM IS MET WITH “**DEER IN THE HEADLIGHT**” GRINS FROM THE CATATONIC COUPLE BEFORE ME BECAUSE THEY ARE SOOOO IN LOVE AND DISMISS ANYTHING I HAVE TO SAY IN THE MATTER OF HAPPINESS AS THE RANTINGS OF AN OLD PREACHER WHO SHOULD JUST GIVE IT UP AND PRONOUNCE THEM HUSBAND AND WIFE. YOU ALL, ON THE OTHER HAND, NEED TO LISTEN UP. HAPPINESS IS A CHOICE.

I SAY THAT RECOGNIZING THAT ILLNESS, TRAGEDY, INJURY AND TERRIBLE LOSS IMPACT OUR EXPERIENCE OF HAPPINESS – SOME OF US MUCH MORE THAN OTHERS. I CERTAINLY DO NOT IMPLY THAT MOURNING, MELANCHOLY, AND DEPRESSION ARE SOME KIND OF MORAL FAILURE. OUR CULTURE ALREADY PENALIZES PEOPLE FOR BEING UNHAPPY AND I ABSOLUTELY DO NOT INTEND TO PILE ON WITH ANYTHING I SAY TODAY. WHAT I AM SAYING IS THAT NO ONE ELSE CAN MAKE YOU BE HAPPY. NO ONE ELSE, BY VIRTUE OF GOOD INTENTIONS, MARITAL OBLIGATION, OR FLAT OUT FRUSTRATION CAN MAKE YOU BE HAPPY. TO THAT EXTENT, YOUR HAPPINESS IS YOUR CHOICE.

LIKE GRATITUDE, HAPPINESS IS MORE AN ORIENTATION THAN AN ACHIEVEMENT. I DON’T KNOW THAT ONE CAN ACQUIRE HAPPINESS LIKE A THING, LIKE A HOUSE OR A CAR. RATHER, HAPPINESS IS WHAT ACCOMPANIES A PERSON WHILE SEEKING A HIGHER PURPOSE. ST. PAUL GETS AT THAT IN HIS LETTER TO THE CHURCH IN COLOSSAE. “**LEAD LIVES WORTHY OF THE LORD,**”

HE WROTE, “FULLY PLEASING TO HIM, AS YOU BEAR FRUIT IN EVERY GOOD WORK AND AS YOU GROW IN THE KNOWLEDGE OF GOD.” LIVE LIVES ORIENTED TO GOD. DO GOOD WORK AS YOU ARE ABLE. HE CONCLUDES THAT PASSAGE WITH, “MAY YOU BE PREPARED TO ENDURE EVERYTHING WITH PATIENCE, WHILE JOYFULLY GIVING THANKS TO THE FATHER, WHO HAS ENABLED YOU TO SHARE IN THE INHERITANCE OF THE SAINTS IN THE LIGHT.”

“ENDURE EVERYTHING WITH PATIENCE, WHILE JOYFULLY GIVING THANKS.” HAPPINESS IS NOT THE PRIZE FOR ENDURANCE, BUT PART OF WHAT ENABLES A PERSON TO ENDURE, PART OF WHAT BUILDS PATIENCE AND UNDERSTANDING. HAVE YOU EVER NOTICED THAT THE PEOPLE MOST IMPATIENT AND LEAST WILLING TO UNDERSTAND ALSO COME ACROSS AS SUPREMELY UNHAPPY PEOPLE?

TO THE EXTENT THAT HAPPINESS IS A CHOICE, SO IS UNHAPPINESS, AS AN INTENTIONAL ORIENTATION. AGAIN, ILLNESS, TRAGEDY, INJURY, AND MOURNING NOTWITHSTANDING, SOME PEOPLE JUST CHOOSE TO BE MISERABLE, UNHAPPY PEOPLE. YOU KNOW THEM. MAYBE YOU ARE ONE. MOST OF US ARE FROM TIME TO TIME. SOME OF US ARE ALL THE TIME. THERE ARE PEOPLE WHO LOOK FOR REASONS TO BE UNHAPPY AND PEOPLE TO BLAME FOR THEIR MISERY! IT’S TRUE!

THERE WAS A FELLOW I USED TO VISIT IN A NURSING HOME – TRUE, NOT THE FIRST PLACE ONE WOULD NORMALLY THINK OF AS A HAPPY FARM. BUT THIS GUY WAS PARTICULARLY UNPLEASANT. IF I VISITED HIM FOR AN HOUR, 55

MINUTES WAS HIM COMPLAINING ABOUT THE FOOD, GRIPING ABOUT THE STAFF, AND CARPING ABOUT WHY NO ONE EVER WANTS TO TALK TO HIM. COMPARATIVELY SPEAKING, HE WAS DOING PRETTY WELL. HE COULD STILL GET AROUND ON HIS OWN, STILL HEAR WELL ENOUGH TO FOLLOW A CONVERSATION AND SEE WELL ENOUGH TO WATCH RE-RUNS OF GUNSMOKE. TALKING TO HIS DAUGHTER, I LEARNED THAT HE HAD ALWAYS BEEN AN UNPLEASANT GROUCH AND IT WASN'T JUST THE NURSING HOME OR ADVANCING AGE THAT MADE HIM SO. IT WAS AS IF HE ABIDED IN MISERY ALL HIS LIFE. LIKE A FISH ABIDES IN WATER, IT WAS ALL HE KNEW. HE LIVED IN A PARCHED, LOVELESS, JOYLESS EMOTIONAL DESERT SQUARE OF HIS OWN CHOOSING AND NO LONGER KNEW HOW TO GET OUT – NO LONGER WANTED TO GET OUT.

JESUS TALKS ABOUT JOY AS A MATTER OF ABIDING IN HIS LOVE. AGAIN, ORIENTING ONE'S LIFE TOWARD SOMETHING GREATER THAN ONE'S SELF IS THE KEY TO HAPPINESS. **“IF YOU KEEP MY COMMANDMENTS,”** SAYS JESUS, **“YOU WILL ABIDE IN MY LOVE.”** JESUS ACTUALLY ONLY ISSUED ONE COMMANDMENT – LOVE ONE ANOTHER. THAT'S IT. LIKE MOSES, HE IMPLORES US. YOU CAN DO THIS. CHOOSE LIFE! CHOOSE JOY! ABIDE IN MY LOVE AND YOU CAN DO THIS. ABIDE IN MY LOVE SO THAT MY JOY MAY BE IN YOU AND YOUR JOY MAY BE COMPLETE, HE SAYS.

WELL, THERE YOU HAVE IT. YOU WANT TO BE HAPPY FOR THE REST OF YOUR LIFE? CHOOSE YOUR FRIENDS CAREFULLY. THEY MATTER. PRACTICE GRATITUDE, EVEN IF YOU HAVE TO FAKE IT TIL YOU MAKE IT. FINALLY,

CHOOSE TO LIVE HAPPINESS AS WELL AS YOU ARE ABLE. TO THAT END,  
CHOOSE TO GIVE YOURSELF OVER TO SOMETHING GREATER, TO SEEK GOD IN  
ALL THINGS, TO ABIDE IN CHRIST'S LOVE AS YOU SEEK TO LOVE OTHERS.

HAPPINESS, LIKE LOVE, IS ONE OF LIFE'S GREAT PARADOXES. THE MORE  
YOU GIVE OF IT, THE MORE YOU RECEIVE. I CANNOT MAKE YOU BE HAPPY, BUT  
I CAN PRAY FOR YOUR HAPPINESS FOR THE REST OF MY LIFE. AMEN.

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