***WHOLEHEARTED LOVE***

John C. Peterson

Covenant Presbyterian Church, Staunton, VA

November 3, 2024

Texts: Psalm 119:1-3 and Mark 12:28-34

 Are you happy? Not just in this very moment in this very place hoping for a short sermon, but day to day, at school, at work, at home – are you happy? In the Declaration of Independence, our nation’s founders asserted that we are all endowed by our Creator with certain unalienable Rights and that among them are Life, Liberty, and the Pursuit of Happiness. In his book *The Soul of America* historian Jon Meacham suggests:

*Beginning with the Declaration of Independence, the pursuit of happiness – the pursuit of the good of the whole, because the good of the whole was crucial to the genuine well-being of the individual, and vice versa – became part of the fabric (at first brittle, to be sure, but steadily stronger) of the young nation.* [[1]](#endnote-1)

As we stand on the brink of another presidential election, I wonder if the pursuit of happiness is still part of the fabric of our nation. Do we still believe that pursuit of the good of the whole is inextricably tied to the well-being of the individual and our own happiness? Is there any public good – any good of the whole – that we pursue together in this fractious and fractured nation? Or is it just the good of one party or the good of certain special interests or the good of some subset of our nation that is being pursued? Is there a public good that is tied to our good, or is happiness now just a private pursuit, disconnected from any common good? Pursuit of happiness may be a God-given right as the Declaration declares, but is happiness worth pursuing anymore as individuals and as a nation, or is it lost to history in pursuit of other goals? Were we to pursue it, how might we find it?

 Rabbi Jonathan Sacks suggests that “we now know that doing good to others, having a network of strong and supportive relationships, and having a sense that one’s life is worthwhile are the three greatest determinants of happiness.”[[2]](#endnote-2) As he describes it, we pursue happiness by serving others, building positive relationships, and finding meaning in our lives. Do any of those determinants mark your life? If happiness seems elusive, is it because one or more of those is lacking in your life day to day? Coming from our Judeo-Christian tradition, perhaps we should not be surprised that Rabbi Sacks would identify those keys to happiness, for they are, in a sense, fleshing out that Great Commandment of which Jesus speaks, when he quotes the Hebrew Scriptures:

*You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and with all your strength, and you shall love your neighbor as yourself.*

Doing good, building healthy relationships, and finding meaning in life are ways in which the commandment is lived out day to day, and doing so may offer a path to healthy happiness. You know the Great Commandment. It is oft-repeated within these walls and far beyond. But do you think of that commandment as being tied to your happiness, or is it just a burden you bear, another commandment to keep that keeps you from doing what you really want to do?

 Far from being burdens, God’s commandments are intended to guide us on paths that lead to more fulfilling, happy lives. They are not obligations we bear to please God but paths we walk as children of God and disciples of Jesus Christ who trust that God knows what is best for us. The psalmist understands this as you heard from that portion of the 119th Psalm that I read moments ago:

*Happy are those whose way is blameless,*

*who walk in the law of the LORD.*

*Happy are those who keep the Lord’s decrees,*

*who seek the Lord with their whole heart,*

*who also do no wrong, but walk in God’s ways.*

Happy are those, blessed are those – the Hebrew can be translated either way for blessing is entwined with happiness in these beatitudes. The psalmist urges us to pursue happiness by following the commandments God gives us and pursuing God with our whole heart. Like the Great Commandment it urges us to hold nothing back, but to pursue God with all that we are, to love God with all that we are – with wholehearted love!

 If we struggle to find happiness in our lives and in our common life, perhaps it is because we love God and pursue God with something less than our whole hearts. We give our hearts to less holy things that ultimately prove unsatisfying. Or we segregate the religious from the rest of our lives as if our lives could be so compartmentalized, rather than integrating our love for God into all that we do and are. In our politics there is more rhetoric about power, popularity, and punishment of enemies than there is promoting the public good – as if one person’s gain necessitates another’s loss. There are a host of sales people who promise tangible paths to happiness, as if happiness could be bought with enough dollars or shekels or Euros apart from our wholehearted pursuit of God. Such happiness may be fantastic in the moment, but fleeting for a lifetime. Others tie their happiness, not to things, but to a person. A woman once remarked to me that since her husband’s death, she was content, but she would never again be happy. Her happiness died when he did. In offering to God our wholehearted love, we still have love to share with others, but our hearts remain whole even as we mourn a death or a break up or distance in any relationship, for they embrace the hope-filled promises of God.

The psalmist and Jesus urge us to pursue happiness by grounding our hearts and lives in God, not in wealth, or other persons, or any of the other things that can be bought or sought or taught. Our happiness may include some such things and people, and those are blessings, but as priorities in our lives they fail miserably! If we love God with all that we are and strive to keep God’s commandments, including that Great Commandment, then we may find ourselves happier and our lives more fulfilled. In the words of St. Augustine:

*Where your pleasure is, there is your treasure. Where your treasure is, there is your heart. Where your heart is, there is your happiness.*

Which brings us back to that question I posed at the beginning of this sermon: Are you happy? Or to put it in Augustine’s terms: Where is your heart?

 Giving your heart to God and loving God with all your heart, soul, mind, and strength, is not some abstract concept. It has flesh and bones – your flesh and bones and those of the neighbors whom you are to love and serve as God commands. Loving God with all that you are means putting your hands, your skills, your creativity, your time, and your wallet where your heart, mind, soul, and strength are. It means holding nothing back. It is a commitment to love God with all of your life, not just with some pieces of it. Today we invite you to offer your pledges for 2025, and as you do, I wonder: does your pledge reflect that kind of wholehearted love for God or something less? If you were to examine how you spend your time, does God get more than a passing remembrance? If someone were to audit your spending, would the auditor conclude that you had given your heart to God or to some other pursuit?

 When I was associate pastor at Grace Covenant Presbyterian Church in Richmond, John Leith was a member of the congregation. Professor Leith was a theologian of some renown at the seminary and in the southern branch of the Presbyterian Church. Within the first few months of my tenure at Grace Covenant I started a church basketball team, which unfortunately had to play in the Men’s Industrial League in the city since there was no church league. We played the city bus drivers and airport baggage handlers and various other teams that were decidedly not churches! As the season was about to start, Dr. Leith came to me to declare in his gruff voice: John, I certainly hope that your zeal for proclamation of the gospel is as great as your zeal for recruiting for the church basketball team! And then he came to all the games.

 Our zeal for proclamation of the gospel through our lives and our love for God should be greater than any other pastime or object of our attention. For where our hearts are, there are happiness will be. Is your happiness tied to your love for God or is it invested in something else, something less?

God wants us to be happy, and God has given us a roadmap to real happiness. It begins with our hearts and our heads following where God leads us and where Jesus calls us. It begins with wholehearted love for God that leads us to love our neighbors. In the words of John Cassian:

*To cling always to God and to the things of God – this must be our major effort, this must be the road that the heart follows*.[[3]](#endnote-3)

For, this is the road to happiness. It is a road that we do not walk alone, for it is a wide road that has plenty of room for fellow travelers who likewise are pursuing happiness through their love for God. If you would walk that road, then begin by giving to God your heart and your life – not some of it, but all of it – for *happy are those who seek the Lord with their whole heart*! So then, don’t worry; be happy! Amen

1. Jon Meacham, *The Soul of America*, Random House: 2018, p.41 [↑](#endnote-ref-1)
2. Rabbi Jonathan Sacks quoted by Krista Tippett, *Becoming Wise*, Penguin Books: 2016, p.192 [↑](#endnote-ref-2)
3. John Cassian in *Leadership* [↑](#endnote-ref-3)