

HOMILY
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Have you noticed how Jesus was a master at keeping his listeners off balance? He always said the unexpected. He praised people others despised. He lifted up those others put down. “*It is more blessed to give than to receive.*” “*For whoever wants to save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for me will save it.*” And two thousand years after his death and resurrection, theologians still wrestle with his exact meaning.

No better example can be found than in today’s teaching called “The Beatitudes.” Many modern translators contend that the word “happy” is closer to Jesus’ original meaning than “blessed.” That doesn’t help. Jesus said you were:

Happy if you are poor.

Happy if you are downhearted.

Happy if you are hated.

Happy if you are persecuted.

To which most of us would say, “Thanks, but no thanks!” We don’t want to be like some homeless fellow shuffling along the street looking for his next meal. We don’t want to weep or mourn or be persecuted. It’s bad enough that sometimes we feel the world is against us. We are more comfortable with J. B. Philips’ take on Jesus’ words:

Happy are the *pushers*: for they get on in the world.

Happy are the *hard-boiled*: for they never let life hurt them.

Happy are they who *complain*: for they get their own way in the end.

Happy are the *blasé*: for they never worry over their sins.

Happy are the *slave drivers*: for they get results.

Happy are the *troublemakers*: for they make people take notice of them.

What is it that Jesus is saying to us about happiness? We need to know. For you and I are not poor; we’re not hungry; we’re not downhearted; we’re not hated; and we’re not persecuted. And many of us are not happy, either. In fact, according to

some studies, people in our affluent, safe, comfortable society are more depressed than they have ever been. Where have we missed it? Where is happiness to be found? Happiness is to be found in teaming up with God—but the catch is, not on our terms but on God’s terms.

I asked God for strength that I might achieve.
I was made weak that I might learn humbly to obey.

I asked for health that I might do great things.
I was given infirmity that I might do better things.

I asked for riches that I might be happy.
I was given poverty that I might be wise.

I asked for power that I might have the praise of people.
I was given weakness that I might feel the need of God.

I asked for all things that I might enjoy life.
I was given life that I might enjoy all things.

I got nothing I asked for but everything that I hoped for. Almost despite myself, my unspoken words were answered. I am, among people, most richly blessed.

The secret to happiness is living according to God’s plan. If we lived according to God’s plan for our lives, we would have a zest for living that would know no bounds.

How is that possible?

Suppose we lived our lives having as our greatest values love for God and love for others? Suppose instead of burning ourselves out seeking wealth or status, we lived all our lives seeking to expand our living? It’s all about continually improving our minds, improving our bodies, improving our spirits—not out of fear, not out of insecurity, not out of greed or lust, but simply out of living fully and completely as Children of God. Can you see how much more productive, how much more effective, how much more alive we would be?

This is what God-filled living is all about. It is not about cloistering ourselves away from the world—though many saints have found much joy in developing that kind of intense relationship with God. For most of us, God-filled living is about turning the world of human values on its head. It's about living our life the way Jesus did. It is about moving from values which are survival based to values that are faith based. It is about moving from a life that is self-centered. It is about moving from a life in which we are conscious of what we lack to a profound gratitude for all that we have. Thus we find true happiness. Thus we find true blessedness.

So on what do you depend for *your* happiness? Jesus was no dewy-eyed dreamer. Just the opposite. Jesus knows that lasting happiness is not found in wealth or a full stomach or even the esteem of our friends or even family relationships—though all of these can satisfy for a while. All of these are important; but there is only one source of true and complete happiness—*God*.