

“Happiness Was, Happiness Will Be, Happiness Is”
(with the Was and Will Be crossed out)

Scripture: Psalm 127 & Proverbs 3: 13-18 (Reflections upon Happiness)

Luke 2:36-40 (Prophetess Anna meets baby Jesus at the temple)

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Redlands First United Methodist Church

I planned to preach a sermon with this title the first Sunday in January at the beginning of the year; however, that was the week of the horrible killing of our two Redlands teenagers, then, in addition, the terrible violence in Tucson. That Sunday I didn't feel too happy in the present, and I knew many of you would feel the same way. So, I put aside a happiness sermon with the full conviction that there would be another time to dwell on happiness. Being able to be happy again, after crises, does happen. However, being happy, in no way diminishes the pain, grief, and wrongness of terrible events a month ago.

Contrary to my family's views, I do not *always start* conversations that I get into with strangers. Sometimes the *other* person starts the conversation. That was the case when I went to *Trader Joe's* to buy something to eat at lunchtime, early in January. I got into the check out line, with my one lunch item, just behind a man who had two items: a half-gallon of milk and a whole apple pie.

HE said to me, “How are you today?”

I answered briefly, “Fine.” Then I added, “How are you?”

He promptly responded, “Thank you for asking. I'm great.”

I was a little puzzled at his response, for HE had asked first. Then, I admit, I carried on the conversation by saying, “You have a good meal there,” or something like that, to which he explained, “I have not eaten for three months. This is my first meal. I'm very happy to be eating.”

I admit that I then scrutinized him a bit more thoroughly. I noticed that he was quite thin; I had already observed that he had had surgery on his throat. As *he* continued to talk, I learned that he had been receiving nourishment from a feeding tube.

That day this man in the check out counter with a half-gallon of milk and a whole apple pie was all smiles. He was **happy in the present**, for he was able to eat.

I enjoyed my lunch a little more that day. I too became very happy to eat, **happy in the present**.

It's in the *Declaration of Independence*: We declare our rights to life, liberty, and *the pursuit of happiness*. Notice, our fore parents did not declare that we have the right to *happiness*, rather, that we have the right to *pursue* happiness.

How many of you saw the 2006 film, *The Pursuit of Happyness*, with Will Smith and his son, Jaden? This movie tells the story of a father and son who have very difficult times—they are homeless at one point. Yet, the father pours his all into the pursuit of happiness. It's a thoughtful film, worthy of seeing. We'll show it as a Meaningful Movie on a Wednesday evening! I won't tell you HOW they got there—to happiness. But it doesn't spoil the plot to say that they did get there.

How much does our Bible talk of happiness? Not really very much, directly.

Psalm 127 introduces the possibility of happiness through the concept of blessing, or feeling blessed. The psalmist explains that one option for our attitude toward good

things in our lives is to consider them the result of our own effort. We can look at the ordinary necessities of life, such as a home, a safe neighborhood, work, and even children solely as the result of human effort. However, the psalmist recommends a different attitude: We can view all these as *blessings from God*. **The Psalmist suggests that we are happier if we not only have the basic necessities, but if we also feel blessed.** Feeling blessed adds a relational dimension to life—a relation to the Divine, a connectedness to God.

Psalms and *Proverbs* are two books of the Hebrew Bible that are called Wisdom Literature. They are called that because their intent is to share wisdom. Wisdom, with a capital “W,” is presented as a divine attribute—either a Being alongside God from the beginning of time or an attribute of God. Wisdom is referred to as feminine in the Bible.

One of many places where we hear Wisdom speak is in Proverbs 3:13-18. She says: “Happy are those who find Wisdom and get understanding.” No doubt that’s etched into many entrance ways to colleges. (Repeat.) We are told that Wisdom holds life in her hands. Wisdom’s ways are pleasant and are paths for peace. It’s up to humans, we are told, to lay hold of Wisdom and to hold her fast. **Wisdom does not give eternal life, but she does her best to offer “the fullest life” that humans can possess.**

The fullest life that we can possess!

Sounds like happiness to me.

Shortly after Jesus is born, in the Gospel of Luke, an elderly prophetess named Anna is shown to be waiting for the Holy Family at the temple. She knows they will be coming, for they’ll come to the temple to bless their child, as most parents do.

When the family arrives, Anna greets them and praises Jesus, declaring that he *will be* the one who will bring salvation.

It’s a fascinating scene, in terms of time:

In the *present*, Anna praises the Christ child.

Yet aged Anna herself represents the *past*, heritage.

Anna’s *present* praise of Jesus is in *anticipation* of what Jesus will do.

This is a moment of past, present, and future intermingling. Anna does not just “give” a blessing; the coming together of Anna, Jesus, and his parents is a moment in time that actually IS a blessing for all of them.

It’s fascinating to consider the relationship between the present and the future—especially when we consider “happiness.”

To *pursue* happiness, we often work hard in the *present*; perhaps we even defer gratification. It may bring us *present* happiness, to anticipate *future* happiness. However, sometimes we miss living in the *present* as we hang onto hope for happiness in the *future*.

A famous excerpt from a longer poem presents a dilemma: “Hope springs eternal in the human breast.” That’s not the dilemma. It’s what comes next that is usually *not* included that introduces the challenge: “Man never is, forever to be, blest.”¹ The complete quote points to the poet’s observation that we tend to be hopeful about the future—things *will be* good. Yet, the poet observes, we seldom “are” happy.

In order to get motivated to pursue happiness we usually experience a “divine itch” for something better. We have some thing that we think could improve in the present. That’s how our pursuit begins. That’s what happened for Will Smith and his son in the 2006 movie. They did pursue and did become happier.

Unfortunately, it's possible that we pursue happiness, and then never notice that we got there.

Looking in the opposite time direction, some of us live with a feeling of happiness that *was*, in a “by-gone” era.

I loved the decade-plus years of watching soccer, softball and baseball, years of open houses at school, scouting, and our church’s children’s musicals. For several years after “empty nest,” I waxed pensive, thinking about how happy I *was*.

In contrast, when friends, even my twin sister began retiring, I began to dream of retirement, when I *would be* happy.

Our situations vary, and appreciation of life stages isn’t the same for everyone. Some people dread retirement and cannot imagine it to be a happy time. Some are not too keen to attend hundreds of children’s sports events.

For some reason a bit of trivia that stuck in my head is that a research survey discovered that 8 year old boys are the happiest of all persons. Yet, for some of us, childhood was not happier than adulthood. No way.

The cultivation of happiness is connected to culture and to religion. Christianity is a religion that talks mostly about the past and future. That’s not true of all religions. In most Eastern Religions—Taoism and Buddhism, for example—it’s the present that matters most. Disciples are taught how to live “as it is,” in the present, “being here now.”²

Sometimes people have to pursue basic survival; we have many obstacles and difficulties. Some people have events in their lives that are very sad. Yet, **happiness** does not seem always correlate with our life circumstances or the number of blessings and tragedies we have known personally.

One factor in “why some find happiness where others find sadness” might relate to their **sense of tense**. *Do we focus upon the past, present, or future, and what useful bridges do we use in the present to reach back to the past and out to the future?*

When we can name the past honestly, fully aware of its joys and sadness, then we do not need to “let it go.” It lives in us in the present. We can live, live fully, in the present. Likewise, when we have something meaningful to “pursue,” then we can move toward the future with both hope and enthusiasm, while still living fully in the present.

I’m sure we all agree with Wisdom (with a capital “W”) in the Bible: it is Wise to live to the fullest in the present, even if at times we wink backward or nod forward with tears of joy or sadness.

In the present we can say, even to a stranger, “How are you today?” Then, when they ask us back, we can respond, “Thanks for asking, I’m great. I’m going to enjoy eating today.”

The camp song that many of us know does not go like this: “If you *were* happy and you knew it say, *I was.*” Neither does it go, “If *you’ll be* happy and you know it say *I’ll be.*” No, no. The song goes (Barbara Shields gets up and leads us, with her guitar): “If you’re happy and you know it, sing **‘I am.’**”

¹ Alexander Pope

² Our looking back toward the Christ’s birth and forward to the fulfillment of a time of Peace can lead us to live expectantly *and* with a joyous now. Yet it can also lead to being forever discontent.