The Futile Pursuit of Happiness

Luke 18:18-36 **November 9, 2008**

The phrase came from the mind and pen of Thomas Jefferson, thirty-three years old, asked by the Continental Congress in the summer of 1776 to write a Declaration of Independence. Historian David McCullough, in his biography of John Adams, observes that the eloquent lines of Jefferson's second paragraph "would stand down the years affecting the human spirit as neither Jefferson nor anyone could have foreseen . . . Jefferson had written for all time. We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness."

The pursuit of happiness: what do you suppose Jefferson meant by that phrase? Is it merely the right to be left alone to pursue whatever it is that produces pleasure? Jefferson was too much of a thinker for that. He was too busy pursuing his own happiness by doing things – reading, talking, gardening, studying, building, inventing, taking upon himself enormous burdens and responsibilities – for his eloquent phrase to mean the right to pursue whatever produces instant gratification.

It's a great question. What is the happiness we are free to pursue? I almost hate to admit it, but one of my favorite comedians was the late Rodney Dangerfield, wrinkled, disheveled, neurotic, eyes darting back and forth, adjusting his tie. He made a career out of self-deprecation, self-humiliation, thought well of by no one, loved by no one, respected by no one. A reporter once tried to persuade him to be serious about what, after all, is a profound issue. "Mr. Dangerfield," he asked, "are you a happy person?" expecting, I suppose, an answer like, "Yes, I'm happy when I make people laugh. I'm happy giving the gift of laughter and joy to my audience." Instead, Dangerfield, with consummate consistency responded, "Of course not. I'm not happy. I've never been happy. My whole life has been a downer, a disaster."

What is happiness? There was an article in the New York Times magazine, "The Futile Pursuit of Happiness." Daniel Gilbert, professor of psychology at Harvard, had collaborated with several other scholars from around the country to try to do a definitive study of happiness. They were examining the decision-making process that shapes our sense of well-being -- how we predict what we think will make us happy or unhappy – and how we feel after the actual experience. The project started when Gilbert and a professor friend were eating lunch and complaining about how badly things were going in their lives generally, in their marriages, careers. Gilbert remembers thinking, "It's all so small. It's really about money."

They determined to find out what makes for happiness. "People ask why I study happiness," Gilbert says. "I answer, why study anything else? It's the holy grail. We're studying the thing that all human action is directed toward." The article was long on interesting analysis but woefully short on

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helpful conclusions, probably because they didn't let Jesus into the project. They do conclude that while we make most decisions on the basis of what we think will make us happy, we are wrong mostly: a new car, new kitchen, will not make us nearly as happy, nor for as long, as we expected.

Gilbert calls the gap between what we predict and what we ultimately experience "the impact bias" and our mistakes in choosing what we think will give us pleasure he calls, "miswanting." He and his colleagues conclude that if we had a better understanding of "impact bias," we would tend to invest our resources in things that really produce happiness. "We might, for example, take more time being with friends than more time making money." That's as close as the project came to prescribing anything.

I wish they had read a little story in the Bible about a man who came to Jesus once and asked his advice on the subject. The man didn't, of course, say, "What should I do to produce happiness?" He asked, "Good Teacher, what do I need to do to inherit eternal life?" Scholars aren't sure what he meant by "eternal life." The Judaism of the day did not have a precise notion of life beyond this life, beyond time, in eternity. So he probably wasn't asking, "What do I need to do to go to heaven when I die?" The Hebrew notion of salvation as wholeness, health and well-being, peace, shalom, is probably closer. What do I need to do to live my life as fully as possible, to be as genuinely and authentically human as I can possibly be? What can I do to add to the quality of God's kingdom, God's eternal realm, to my life now, to become a citizen of God's realm right now and to know it? What can I do to know at the end of the day that I have lived fully and honestly and that my life mattered?"

Jesus' answer is the orthodox formula of the day: obey the commandments. "I've done that," the man replies. "There must be something more, because I'm not living, experiencing the authentic, real, eternal life." Jesus' response is stunning: "Sell all you have, give it all to the poor and come follow me." The man isn't happy with that answer at all because he is rich. As the man slowly walks away, Jesus turns to the disciples and says, "How hard it is for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God."

There is probably no more countercultural statement in the entire Bible than that. Beginning that very day, his followers have pushed back at that statement, starting with the disciples themselves. They weren't rich. Far from it. But they understood perfectly well that if what he said was true, no one but the abject, desperately poor is getting in. So they asked, "Then who can be saved?" And Jesus said, "What is impossible for mortals is possible with God," which I interpret to mean, "Stop worrying about your ultimate salvation. It's in God's hands, not yours. And God's hands are kind and gracious and merciful. Your priority is your one and only life and how you will live it."

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There was a wonderful “New Yorker” cartoon some time ago that showed a cocktail lounge with several businessmen sitting at the bar with their end-of-the-day drinks. The men are intently watching the evening news on the television set over the bar and hear the newscaster say, “Jitters on Wall Street today over rumors that Alan Greenspan said, ‘A rich man can as soon enter heaven as a camel fit through the eye of a needle.’” It could just as well have been Ben Bernanke, the Fed chairman now.

It is so radical his followers have been pushing back, arguing with and about this text from the very day he said it. Maybe he didn’t really say “camel.” After all, the words for “rope” and “camel” are similar in Greek, so maybe a scribe copying the ancient text by candlelight got it wrong: easier to put a fat thread through the eye of a needle -- difficult, but plausible. Or maybe there was a little hole called the eye of a needle in the city wall through which a late-arriving traveler could enter after the gates were closed, by unloading his camel, forcing it to its knees, then getting behind it and pushing and shoving it through. That has always been a favorite. Preachers love it on Stewardship Sunday. You can get into the kingdom by offloading some of your goods – as in a generous pledge to the church. Sadly, this interpretation seems to have been invented in the ninth century, but it’s certainly creative.

I think Jesus means to address the man’s real question and real human need. The man can’t give his wealth away. That’s his problem. He isn’t free. Someone said we don’t own anything we can’t give away; it owns us. That’s the problem here. Distinguished theologian Paul Tillich said that our God is whatever we call our ultimate concern. This man’s ultimate concern is his wealth, his stuff. The wealthy man’s problem was that he’d invested in the wrong thing for his happiness, or his salvation. The impact bias was clear. It wasn’t working. What he was committed to wasn’t providing what he so deeply wanted. But he couldn’t change.

A Protestant pastor in Cuba by the name of Hector Mendez has traveled and spoken extensively in this country. On several occasions, I understand, Americans have tried to be supportive by saying sympathetic things about how difficult it must be to remain faithful in a culture that is officially hostile to religion, where saying the wrong thing from the pulpit can mean a government investigation and interrogation. And his reply to these Americans has been: “It may be easier for us in Cuba to remain faithful than for you who live with such overwhelming and seductive abundance.”

The simple truth is that we are all big camels, regardless of what has happened to our economy in recent weeks. The simple truth is that even the less affluent of us are wealthy by anybody’s standards. But notice that Jesus doesn’t criticize the man’s wealth as the preacher is tempted to do. He certainly doesn’t criticize his religion. He simply wants to go deeper – to this

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man's heart and soul, to that place deep inside where his fundamental values and commitments are, where the freedom to love and give life away resides.

Presbyterian theologian George Stroup, in a scholarly treatment of the doctrine of salvation, quotes John Calvin, who said, "Our minds, stunned by the empty dazzlement of riches, powers, and honors, become so deadened that they can so no further." "The issue, then, as now,"observes Stroup, "is not finally a matter of what one believes, but as the Bible recognizes, what one loves most fervently."

The man who came to Jesus with his profound question wasn't free – not free to give, not free to love. Jesus, I think, wanted him to loosen up, to release his tight grip on his possessions, loosen up on the security he assumed his wealth was buying him, loosen up on his constricted life so focused on maintaining and growing his portfolio. Jesus wanted him to learn to be human again and vulnerable again. Jesus wanted him to think hard about his happiness, his life's meaning and purpose, and invest his attention and resources and energy and hope and love there. And that, I believe, is what Jesus wants for you and me.

In two weeks we observe Stewardship and Thanksgiving Sunday. Last Sunday we celebrated all Saints Day, the people who nurtured us, taught us, brought the person that-had-not-yet appeared out of us. I thought of my parents and their parents, who came over to this country from Russia as Germans seeking asylum from Russian coercion. I also thought about how they loved this country, but would fell strenuously at odds with much of what has happened in recent years. But I thought also of the people on the memorial plaques in the back, many of whom knew and cherished, and how invested they were in this church and its meaning for them and this community of folks around us. How well will we receive this heritage which has been passed on to us? What new ministries will we seek out in these weeks ahead?

I thought about the gift my family gave me of knowing that to live is to love, and not to love, not to care enough to be vulnerable, to risk losing, is not really to live at all. That's who saints are. You can remember and name them too, the ones who taught you to love, the ones who taught all of us the gospel, that to live you must love enough to put your life on the line, to live you must risk everything: Martin Luther King, Bishop Desmond Tutu, Dietrich Bonhoeffer.

William Sloane Coffin, not well, thinking about the end of life and writing this: "Descartes, he wrote, was mistaken: "Coqito ergo sum" ---"I think therefore I am." Nonsense, Coffin wrote. "Amo ergo sum" – "I love therefore I am." That's what Jesus meant when he told a man one day that he needed to learn how to love if he wanted to live eternally. "Love," Coffin wrote, "is its own reward…The rewards of loving are to become yet more vulnerable, more tender, more caring."

And, Jesus said, more alive.

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