



Half Truths: God Wants You to Be Happy

August 23, 2015 | Rev. Taylor Fuerst

Luke 12: And he told them this parable: "The ground of a certain rich man yielded an abundant harvest. He thought to himself, 'What shall I do? I have no place to store my crops.' "Then he said, 'This is what I'll do. I will tear down my barns and build bigger ones, and there I will store my surplus grain. And I'll say to myself, "You have plenty of grain laid up for many years. Take life easy; eat, drink and be merry.'" "But God said to him, 'You fool! This very night your life will be demanded from you. Then who will get what you have prepared for yourself?' "This is how it will be with whoever stores up things for themselves but is not rich toward God." Then Jesus said to his disciples: "Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat; or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothes. Consider the ravens: They do not sow or reap, they have no storeroom or barn; yet God feeds them. And how much more valuable you are than birds! Who of you by worrying can add a single hour to your life? Since you cannot do this very little thing, why do you worry about the rest?"

"Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom. Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out, a treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

*The word of God for the People of God. **Thanks be to God.***

If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands! If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands! If you're happy and you know it, then your face will surely show it. If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands!

So how do you know it? How do you know you're happy?

Do you feel a certain lightness in your step? Do you feel more inclined to sing with the radio? Do you get excited to tell other people what's going on in your life?

It is the job of some marketers--I won't lump all marketers together on this, but at least some--to convince you and me that we may not be happy. Their job is to sell us on one idea, one thought, and this is it: maybe there's something better. Maybe my life can be better. Maybe my appearance can be better. Maybe my marriage or my relationship can be better. Maybe my image or my resume can be better. Maybe what's here, what I have, what I am is not quite enough...maybe I'm not as happy as I could be.

The 19th Century Philosopher John Stuart Mill once said, "Ask yourself whether you are happy, and you cease to be so." Well, friends, the truth is, we are being asked this question several times a day.

The last few days I began reading a book called "The Life-Changing Magic of Tidying Up" where Marie Kondo, who is the clean guru of the world, joyfully informed me that because the rooms in my house and my office are not tidy, I am lacking in happiness. "In contrast," she says, "I feel happy and content. I have time to experience bliss in my quiet space, where even the air feels fresh and clean; time to sit and sip herbal tea while I reflect on my day." And now she's got me looking around my house thinking "How can I possibly be happy with all this clutter? I don't even own herbal tea!"

Are you happy? Do you know it?

Today we begin a series of Sundays where we are focusing on Half-Truths--we are considering those cliches that get thrown around with churchy people and in this kind of quasi-Christian culture that we live in. We are going to take a look at these sayings, shed a little light of scripture on them and see if we can find our way past the half-truth to the whole truth.

And today we start with the line we've all heard before: God wants you to be happy.

It's got truth in it. Certainly God does not desire for you to be unhappy, right? God does want good for you. God wants wholeness for you, fulfillment for you; God wants for you to be fully alive--in the Gospel of John, Jesus says, "I came that they might have life and life abundant." Surely happiness is included in abundant life. Surely there is some truth in this saying, that God wants me and you to be happy.

The saying is not something that gets said out loud very often, but it sort of pervades our thinking. We do hear it from the lips of certain preachers--when things go our way, and we get the things we want--the job, the spouse, even just the parking space--when those things just sort of line up, it must be a sign of divine favor. If I'm happy, it must be a sign that God is happy with me, because God wants me to be happy.

Let's see, there's another way it plays out--like this: God wants you to be happy, so no matter what, if you love God, you better be happy, because God's people are happy. If you aren't happy, you better not show your face in church, because all those happy people may think you don't really love Jesus if you aren't happy, too. And then suddenly Church becomes this happy zone, a place where we only preach happy things, because God wants you happy, and if you're not happy, well then there's either something wrong with you or something wrong with God.

And then it turns to a crisis of faith--if God wants me to be happy, then why didn't this go my way? Why didn't God arrange for the things that God knows will make me happy?

And here's where the truth breaks down. We carry out this theology to its furthest degree, and suddenly we think that God not only wants us to be happy--but that God exists to make us happy.

Let's back up and look at happiness. Happiness over the last few centuries has become more and more equated with pleasure. One scholar, Darrin McMahon, has written a history of happiness, and he says that these days, happiness is "more about getting little infusions of pleasure, about feeling good rather than being good..." Its "less about living the well-lived life," and more "about experiencing the well-felt moment."

You see, a shift came in the 17th and 18th centuries, when people began to see happiness as something that everyone has a right to, a natural endowment, a self-evident truth, as Thomas Jefferson put it. You see the shift that happened that led Jefferson to believe that our greatest pursuit ought to be happiness is a shift that said we shouldn't have to apologize for our pleasures here on earth, and in fact, we should work to pursue more of them. Our work should be to increase pleasure and decrease pain, and this--this lack of suffering and enjoyment of pleasurable things--this would define happiness.

Now, several centuries later, it's hard to imagine happiness being anything else. But before this time, when we look back to the great Greek and Roman philosophers, their version of happiness had very little to do with good feelings, and much more to do with a good life. It was assumed that it took a lifetime to achieve happiness, and the road on the way there would certainly include plenty of pain. Happiness was much less fleeting; it was more grounded. Cicero even claimed that the happy man will be happy even on the torture rack. For Aristotle, Happiness was "a life lived according to virtue." Happiness did not change moment-by-moment, but rather it was built over a lifetime.

So, then, enter Big Barn Bob here in Jesus' parable in Luke 12. Bob's got a bumper crop this year--there is grain and grain to spare, he is living high on the hog. He doesn't even have room for all this grain, and so he says to himself (by the way, have you ever noticed that Bob never actually talks to anyone besides himself? He actually has a dialogue with himself, in which he refers to future dialogues he plans to have...with himself), so he says to himself, "Self, let's build bigger barns! And then we can retire, and not have to work to farm all this grain, and then, finally, my whole life can be about me. Then, I will tell myself, 'Self, now you can take it easy! Just spend your days feeling good--being...happy.'"

This feel-good, easy-street life is Bob's greatest goal. His treasure...is in his pleasure. His happiness is firmly located in this easy life that he has finally achieved: eat, drink, and be merry. Enjoy yourself. What makes Bob happy, what brings him happiness, is experiencing a series, one-after-another, a series of well-felt moments. Little infusions of pleasure. All for himself. He doesn't even talk about eating and drinking and being merry with other people--just himself. Just Bob. His happiness is centered on a universe that revolves around him and his pleasure. And he is willing to store up his treasure for that.

In reflecting on this parable, Jesus says, "Do not be afraid, little flock, for your Father has been pleased to give you the kingdom." The NRSV says "It is your Father's good pleasure to give you the kingdom." You might say your Father's *happiness*, to give you the kingdom.

In that moment, it's as if Jesus gives us permission to find our happiness someplace other than in barns full of grain, or in days of eating, drinking, and being merry. He invites us to find our

happiness somewhere besides ourselves, and making our lives easy, and having more pleasure than pain. "Sell your possessions and give to the poor. Provide purses for yourselves that will not wear out." This does not sound like the kind of happiness that involves going from one pleasurable moment to the next. "A treasure in heaven that will never fail, where no thief comes near and no moth destroys. For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also."

Now, contrast the life of Big Barn Bob with the Apostle Paul. Paul found the happiness that God had in mind for him when he turned his life around and centered it on those who he knew needed to hear the good news of grace through Jesus Christ. While he was in prison he wrote to the Philippians, "Even if I am executed here and now, I'll rejoice in being an element in the offering of your faith that you make on Christ's altar..." His circumstances were--well, circumstantial. They weren't the root of his happiness! His happiness was rooted in something everlasting, something that went with him from city to city, from church to church, through persecution and through prison. Paul knew that the happiness that God wanted for him was rooted in something much bigger than him, something much bigger than his circumstances. The happiness that God wanted for Paul--was all wrapped up in Paul being a herald for the kingdom of God. And Paul knew that that kind of happiness was bound to involve some suffering. It was bound to mean a whole lot of work, late nights, tough travel, danger, frustration, turning down the easy life that he walked away from. But oh, this happiness--not even prison could take it away.

When we take our happiness away from the model of Bob and his bigger and bigger barns, and we center it more in the model of Paul, and of Jesus, we find the happiness God wants for us is something far greater than pleasure. It's something far less fleeting than comfort, or getting what we want. God wants you to be happy. The question is what are the things that bring you happiness? That's what God wants to work on. God wants to shift your happiness a little further away from you, and your circumstances, and on to something that doesn't fade--that doesn't fail--that can't be stolen and can't be destroyed. Happiness in the model of Paul, and of Jesus, comes from being a part of God's kingdom, from being loved and used by God. It comes from using your life to make something or someone else whole. Using your life--your time, your money, your energy, your work, your retirement, whatever you've got--pouring it out to make something right in the world. To fill someone up who is empty. To see what God might do.

It's why we stand in admiration of teachers and administrators and educators of all kinds, who pour themselves out, day after day, suffering included, in order to shape a child's life. At some point this year, you will say, "This is crazy. I can't believe I love this, but I do. I love it. It makes me happy."

And it's not just teachers--hopefully, it's the rest of us, too. Hopefully at some point this year, you will look in exasperation at your boss, or at your patient, or at your kids, or at your committee of fellow volunteers, or at your pastor, and say, "Sometimes this life, this work, this thing that God has given me to do, sometimes it makes me crazy. But I love it. It makes me happy." And then where your treasure is, in this work God is doing, in this kingdom God is building, there you'll find your heart and your happiness, too. ###