

Sermon: "Faithful Happiness"
Rev. Martha Hodges April 10, 2011

Over this past church year, we've looked at happiness from different angles. We've talked about the physiology, the psychology and the culture of happiness. We've talked about different kinds of happiness, from mild contentment to crazy euphoria, from pleasure to deep fulfillment and back again. Today, I want to talk about religion. Does faith bring about happiness? Looking around at the world, it wouldn't seem so. We all know happy atheists (maybe you are one) and miserable religious zealots. If religion were a guarantee of happiness, there would be no religious wars, no religious persecution.

And yet, sociologists and psychologists tell us that people who attend religious services report that they are "very happy" significantly more often than those who don't. Now, there are plenty of possible explanations for this. Maybe they go to church because they're happy rather than the other way around. Maybe they're happier because they have a community – friendships and a support system – within their congregation. Maybe they're happier because they feel they can rely on moral absolutes and aren't required to question everything or suffer uncertainty. Or because they believe that God is watching out for them. Or that the world is a just place, or that there will be justice in the hereafter. Or maybe religion helps them believe that the world at least makes some kind of sense, that there is some meaning to their struggles, even if they can't see what it is.

Or is there something in the teachings of the religions themselves? Do religions teach people how to be happy? And what about Unitarian Universalism? What does our tradition tell us about happiness?

Those are hard answers to answer. First of all, religions evolve and diversity within each of the world's major religious traditions only increases over time. It's tough – and foolhardy – to try to generalize too much. Think about comparing the faith of the early Israelites with that of modern urban American Jews. Or the Christianity of a fourteenth century monk with the Christianity of a modern American Evangelical; or a Zen Buddhist with a Tibetan Buddhist. History and culture work their changes on every religion, including ours.

Nevertheless, fools rush in where angels fear to tread, so allow me to make a few unwise generalizations. Religions seem to group themselves around several themes when they talk about happiness.

Here is one of those themes: Is happiness possible, or even worth pursuing, in this life? Or is it reserved for the afterlife? Another one: Is happiness an individual matter, or a societal concern? Does your personal happiness matter to God, or is it only the well-being of the community that is important? And another theme: Does happiness come from God's grace or is it something we earn from our behavior? Is it internal or external in origin? And this: Is, as the ancient Greeks believed, virtue synonymous with happiness? Does doing good cause one to experience goodness and happiness? And related to all of the above: Do we get our just desserts or are we doomed from the start?

On the first question about whether happiness is possible or desirable in this life, Judaism, like Unitarian Universalism, fervently declares, Yes! What happens in the afterlife, if there is one, is of less concern than what we do in this life to create happiness for ourselves and others. Jewish scripture and rabbinical teachings encourage us to enjoy the pleasures of this life, for they are gifts from God. They are to be celebrated with gratitude and enthusiasm. At the same time, the law of God must be always observed. Excess leads to irresponsible and self-serving behavior. The Jewish tradition teaches that we are not inherently sinful beings who must suffer to achieve God's forgiveness. Sin, on the contrary, is understood as crime against the wholeness and health of the community and its covenant with God.

Buddhism, too teaches that happiness is possible and desirable. The current Dalai Lama has stated that the pursuit of happiness is the very purpose of life. In contrast to Judaism, however, happiness is not to be achieved by immersing oneself in the things of this world, but by detaching from them. Life is suffering, the Buddha taught: illness, want, dissatisfaction and death are inherently human. Suffering and happiness come not from these external realities, however but are created in our minds, by our acceptance or lack of acceptance. Happiness is to be discovered in the relinquishing of desires – desires which are by their nature never satisfied. It is greed, anger, envy and hatred that cause us to suffer, not the world itself. And what is created by the mind can be vanquished by the mind. By following the Middle Path and living a life of compassion and virtue, we can accumulate karma and eventual liberation from the round of reincarnation. In the meantime, we can live lives of peace, balance and fulfillment.

Hinduism, like its offshoot religion of Buddhism, also believes in the value of happiness. And like Buddhists, Hindus believe that this world is illusion, temporary and deceptive. And, like Buddhism, Hinduism offers a clear set of rules for living within this illusory world. Hinduism is a very realistic faith in many ways. It recognizes that one size does not fit all. People have different needs and wants depending on their time of life and circumstances, and all are encouraged to find happiness as they are able within those limitations. The ultimate fulfillment lies, however in the discovery of God, Atman, the indescribable bliss which lies within the self. This is achieved through rigorous self-discipline and renunciation of worldly concerns.

Of all the great world religions, Islam and Christianity share an intense focus on the next life. The purpose of this life is primarily to earn our reward in the next one. Salvation is the ultimate happiness and is earned by satisfying God and submitting to his will. We should practice charity and refrain from evil deeds, increasing the well-being of others as much as possible, but these short-term goals of our life on earth are mere distractions from our true purpose, which is to achieve immortal bliss in the company of the Almighty.

Now we're getting into familiar territory – the story of the Christian tradition that has formed our own American culture and influences each of us to this day, regardless of our religious beliefs. Not the kindly "love thy neighbor" Christianity of the liberal Christian church, but the harsh teachings of the Catholic and Calvinist settlers who brought with them their doctrines of sin and atonement. This version of Christianity, still apparent in many orthodox American sects, cares little for happiness in this life. We start out marked by original sin and spend our lives suffering as a result. Happiness is an irrelevant concept. What matters is salvation, the relief of suffering in the hereafter, reserved for the chosen and the true believer.

Thankfully, this exclusive and dismal view has little to do with most present-day Christianity. And yet, it has left its mark, and it is the tradition that our own Unitarians and Universalists grew from.

The early Unitarians believed that this salvation, this heavenly happiness, could be earned through self-improvement, by cultivating virtue: “salvation by character,” they called it. These sober Bostonians, wealthy and educated, believed in setting a good example for others. Listen to this extremely subdued, if somewhat whimsical, vision of happiness as described by our beloved William Ellery Channing. The father of American Unitarianism, in a letter written early in his career: True happiness, he writes, is

the uniform serenity of a well-governed mind, of disciplined affections, of a heart steadily devoted to objects which reason and religion recommend. According to my tame imagination, Happiness is a very demure lady, almost as prim as the wives of the Pilgrims of New England. She smiles indeed, most benignantly, but very seldom laughs; she may sigh, but very seldom sobs; the tear may start in her eye, the tear of gratitude and of sympathy, but it seldom streams down the cheek. Her step is sometimes quickened, but she does not waste her spirits and strength in violent and unnatural efforts. She cultivates judgment more than fancy. She employs imagination, not to dress up airy fictions, not to throw a false, short-lived luster over the surrounding scenery, but to array in splendor distant objects, which reason assures her are most glorious and excellent, but which, from their distance, are apt to fade away before the eye, and to lose their power over the heart."

Those distant objects being, I presume, the life hereafter and the coming Kingdom of God.

The Universalists, as we know, were a somewhat less reserved bunch. For them, happiness also was to be found in the life of virtue, but because serving and pleasing God was its own reward. Heaven, after all, was guaranteed to sinner and saint alike, because God's greatest desire was the happiness of his children. Human beings, the Universalists and the Unitarians agreed, were endowed with innate goodness. For the Unitarians, this goodness was primarily an individual matter. For the Universalists, it was not enough to be good in the privacy of your family. Goodness, and the happiness that it produced, was a public affair, a matter of serving God's design by serving one's neighbors, by increasing the general happiness available to all through good works and social reform.

So what difference does any of this make to us as religious liberals?

We tend to think of ourselves as religious originals, and in some ways, we are. But even when our beliefs have arisen anew in a new land and new era, they address the same questions, the same themes, as all other religions. And our answers, while not necessarily directly traceable to other traditions, echo the answers that have been found through the centuries. These questions about happiness – what it is, how to attain it, and if we deserve it – are universal human and religious questions.

Like our Jewish ancestors, the focus of our energies and concerns is this life, this world. A life well lived is its own reward. And like the ancient Hebrews, we believe that our personal well being is inextricably linked to the well being of the larger community – a community whose

boundaries grow larger every year as the web of interdependence that links us to others becomes more visible in a shrinking world.

Like the Buddhism to which so many of us are drawn, Unitarian Universalism teaches us that happiness is possible and that we have the means to create it. Furthermore, along with the Eastern religions, we agree with the message that a deep sense of peace and well being cannot be attained at the expense of others, and that material goods, wealth and power are not the source of lasting fulfillment.

Unlike the great Abrahamic religions of Judaism, Christianity and Islam, Unitarian Universalism does not preach that happiness lies in submission to the will of God. Submitting to anything does not come easily to us, with our pride in individualism and devotion to free thought. Perhaps this is changing, however, in an unexpected way.

I'm thinking of the threat to the planet. We must submit to the reality of our dependence upon the earth and upon one another, regardless of culture, nationality or religion. Some of you have heard me say that, for me, the challenge is not to figure out the nature of some abstraction, entity or ideal called God. For me, the challenge is to confront what I know to be true and to ask, "Could this be what others understand by God?" If I can develop this common vocabulary with the majority of my fellow human beings who profess a belief in a deity, I will understand the world that much more deeply and richly.

One such understanding of God is the very web of interdependence that links us to all life. This interdependent web is as good a definition of the word "God" as any, in my opinion. And if I, even tentatively, accept this understanding of divinity, then I must agree that submission to the will of the Divine is not only the way to happiness for myself and others, but to survival itself.

Religious people speak of loving God. This used to make little sense to me as long as I conceived of that God as an all-powerful being, all-seeing, all-knowing, moody and tyrannical – the traditional "old man in the sky." But what if we try on this idea. What if the God we love is life itself? The life that consists of these relationships, these natural attractions and dependencies, these physical laws and their consequences, this interdependent web – this life? Do we not love this life? This mysterious interworking of cause and effect, of beauty and pain, mind, spirit and body? This interconnection of love and yearning? Of power and error and resilience?

This is the Holiness that Kenneth Patton speaks of in our Call to Worship, that e e cummings wonders at in our Opening Words, and Mary Oliver celebrates with awe in her poem about the black bear in spring. This is the life, the Mystery, that we worship with our eyes and ears and fingertips; the world that we love through heart and mind and body. Our Unitarian Universalism is about falling in love with life. Life that we are in a struggle to preserve from our materialism, from our chasing after happiness in all the wrong places. The life that we have put in jeopardy by our greed and misguided attempts to find happiness through things, through money and power.

Happiness is possible, and is the right of all living things. Happiness, our own and that of the world community, is our responsibility. We are given great resources: the intelligence and drive to split the atom, the potential power contained in the earth, the sea and the sun and in all living and growing things. Do we desire happiness enough – happiness for all, well-being, peace and freedom for all -- to look beyond war and exploitation of the earth and other beings? Do we love this life enough to save it, to save ourselves and each other?

As Mary Oliver wrote, “There is only one question: How to love this world?” Let us learn this perfect happiness. Let us learn to love.