

**Songs of the Heart:  
THE KEY TO HAPPINESS**

**Psalm 112**

*People of faith are called to holiness.*

A sermon preached by  
Rev. Dr. William O. (Bud) Reeves  
First United Methodist Church  
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What we want is to be happy. Whatever it takes, we just want to be happy. The things we want out of life—material wealth, a good family, a meaningful occupation, a relationship with God—these are the things we desire because we think they will make us happy. Still we wonder sometimes, “What is the key to happiness?”

A few years ago, social scientists David G. Meyers and Ed Diener wrote an article called “The Science of Happiness.” They found that there is little correlation between wealth and happiness. The folks on Forbes’ list of the 100 richest Americans are no happier than the average American. Neither is there a correlation between health and happiness. People coping with disease or disability can be models of joyful living. You’ve seen that, too.

However, these scientists did find five common characteristics of happy people:

1. *Positive self-image.* Happy people generally feel good about themselves, their abilities, and their gifts.

2. *Personal control.* Happy people take control of their lives, making decisions and exerting discipline to achieve goals. They don’t feel powerless.

3. *Optimism.* Happy people have a positive outlook. They tend to see the glass half-full instead of half-empty.

4. *Relationships.* Happy people are able to form and keep long-lasting meaningful relationships with others.

5. The one characteristic these researchers related most to happiness was *faith*. Belief in God is a key ingredient in a happy life. They concluded, “Actively religious people are much less likely to become delinquent, to abuse drugs and alcohol, to divorce, and to commit suicide.” In Europe and North America, religiously active people report greater happiness. In one Gallup Poll, highly spiritual people were twice as likely to declare themselves “very happy” as those lowest in spiritual commitment. Other surveys find that happiness and life satisfaction rise with the strength of religious affiliation and the frequency of worship attendance. One statistical digest of research

among the elderly found that one of the best predictors of life satisfaction is faith.<sup>1</sup>

So modern social scientists have discovered what God's people have always known. Happiness is the end product of a relationship with our heavenly Father. This summer we have been walking through the Book of Psalms. We have pointed out that Psalms is the worship book of ancient Israel. But we have also mentioned several times that Psalms is a guide to the happy life. Scattered throughout the Psalms are beatitudes, statements about happiness that serve as our instructions for living with joy. Our text today begins with one: "*Praise the Lord! Happy are those who fear the Lord, who greatly delight in his commandments.*"<sup>2</sup>

Don't get hung up on the word "fear." Last week I mentioned that in the Old Testament context fear means a relationship of respect, dependence and awe. Encountering the presence of a holy God is a little scary. What the Psalmist is saying is that those who do encounter this awesome God, those who walk in God's way, will enjoy a blessed life. Holiness leads to happiness. Faithful living brings joy.

Our Methodist founder, John Wesley, was big on holiness. When he was still a college student at Oxford, he formed a small group called the Holy Club, dedicated to Scripture study, prayer, and mission work. His slogan in ministry was "holiness of heart and life." His mission for the Methodist movement was "to spread scriptural holiness throughout the land."

Wesley gave the Methodists three Gimple Rules to help them achieve holiness. We have mentioned these before, but let me remind you:

- **Do no harm.** Don't hurt other people, and stay away from bad stuff.
- **Do good.** Focus on the good and positive things in life that build up your relationship with God and other people.
- **Practice the means of grace.** Continually do the things God has given us to maintain and grow our faith: prayer, Scripture reading, worship, sacraments, holy conversation, and acts of service.<sup>3</sup>

This is the way to holiness. This is the way to happiness. In fact, in Scripture the two are so closely related, you can hardly say one without thinking of the other. So when I say holy today, don't be thinking of some pious, self-righteous, elitist attitude. Think about good, positive, happy, abundant—the kind of life God wants us to enjoy. Let me highlight three characteristics of a holy life from our Psalm this morning.

Holy people are **GENEROUS**. The life of faith always includes giving of ourselves. The Psalmist says, *“It is well with those who deal generously and lend, who conduct their affairs with justice. ...They have distributed freely, they have given to the poor; their righteousness endures forever.”*<sup>4</sup>

Stephen Covey, the leadership guru, taught us years ago about the abundance mentality. Highly effective people, to use Covey's term, believe in the abundance of resources for achieving our goals. Our attitude should not be, “There's never enough for everybody. I'd better get mine or keep mine before someone else grabs it.” That's a scarcity mentality.

Rather, the highly effective person, the holy person, has an abundance mentality that says, “There is plenty to go around. Let's share. Let's give. Let's spread the wealth.” Being stingy never produces joy—have you ever heard of a happy miser? Our God is a God of abundance, and walking with God produces generosity, which brings us joy.

The Marquis de Lafayette was a French general who came to the aid of General George Washington in the Revolutionary War. Then he returned to France and became an advocate for freedom and democracy. As a nobleman, he had charge of several estates. In 1783, the wheat harvest in France was very poor, but because of the size of his holdings, the barns of Lafayette were still full. One of his farm managers suggested that the Marquis take advantage of the situation. “The bad harvest has increased the price of wheat,” he said. “Now is the time to sell.”

Lafayette thought about the hungry peasants in the surrounding villages and said, “No, now is the time to give.”<sup>5</sup>

No matter what your economic situation might be, even when the resources are tight, holy people find ways to give of themselves. In 2005 a little 8-year-old girl in South Dakota named Briton Nordemeyer had heard of the devastation of Hurricane Katrina. Her church was raising money to send to the Red Cross for relief. Briton didn’t have much money, but she had just lost a tooth. So she decided to donate whatever the tooth fairy might bring for the tooth to the children who had lost everything in the hurricane.

But instead of waiting for the tooth fairy to arrive, Briton mailed her tooth to the Red Cross! She wrote a letter explaining her confidence that the tooth fairy would make payment to the Red Cross directly. When news about Briton's generosity went public, the Red Cross received a \$500 donation from an anonymous donor who had heard the story and wanted to help provide a happy ending.<sup>6</sup>

Giving equals living. A holy life includes the mentality of abundance, the spirit of generosity. This fall, we will spend more time talking about generosity

The second characteristic of a holy life mentioned in this Psalm is **STEADFASTNESS**. The holy person lives a life that is steadfast, consistent, and persistent in the pursuit of God. The life of faith is distinct and distinguishable. The psalmist says, “*They rise in the darkness as a light for the upright; they are gracious, merciful, and righteous. ...They are not afraid of evil tidings; their hearts are firm, secure in the Lord. Their hearts are steady, they will not be afraid.*”<sup>7</sup>

God in his mercy did not leave us to figure out how we are supposed to live. God gives us the rules. God has his Top Ten list. Wesley boiled it down to the three we mentioned: Do no harm. Do Good. Practice the means of grace. It’s all about living a holy life. Nobody said it was easy, but at least it’s simple. All we have to do to find happiness is to follow God’s plan. We play by God’s rules. And play by them consistently. Holiness is not a hit-and-miss proposition. It’s a steady,

stable, persistent perseverance toward the end, and the end is union with God.

Eugene Peterson, the pastor and writer who translated the Bible into *The Message*, called his life and ministry “a long obedience in the same direction.” The phrase actually came from the German philosopher Friedrich Nietzsche, who was famous for saying in the 19<sup>th</sup> century that God was dead. But Nietzsche also said, “The essential thing in heaven and earth is that there should be a long obedience in the same direction; [which] thereby results, and has always resulted in the long run, [in] something that has made life worth living.”<sup>8</sup>

Peterson pastored the same small Presbyterian church in Maryland for decades while he was gaining fame writing his books, resisting the call to pastor larger and more prestigious churches. He said that this long obedience is how we enter into God’s story. We don’t have the intelligence to figure out all the answers. We can’t invent the rules. But we can steadfastly, consistently walk the path God has laid out for us. Peterson says, “The Holy Spirit is writing us into the revelation, the story of salvation. We find ourselves in the story as followers of Jesus. Jesus calls us to follow him, and we obey—or we do not. This is an immense world of God’s salvation that we are entering; we don’t know enough to use or apply anything. Our task is to obey—believingly, trustingly obey. Simply obey in a ‘long obedience.’”<sup>9</sup> In our steadfast obedience, our hearts will be steady; we will not be afraid. We will not be lost. We will be holy and happy.

Steadfast obedience to God is what keeps us safe in times of trouble. Everybody has trouble; everybody experiences pain and anxiety and grief sometimes. But choosing God’s holy way gives us a connection to a power higher than ourselves. Steadfast obedience gives us the ability to cope with our difficulties and to overcome our obstacles. Listen again to the words of the Psalm: “*They are not afraid of evil tidings; their hearts are firm, secure in the Lord. Their hearts are steady, they will not be afraid; in the end they will look in triumph on their foes.*”<sup>10</sup>

So the last characteristic I want to mention today is **VICTORY**. The holy life is victorious. Look at what happens to the wicked: “*The wicked see [the victory of the righteous] and are angry; they gnash their teeth and melt away; the desire of the wicked comes to nothing.*”<sup>11</sup> I know sometimes it seems like the wicked prosper, but the Scripture promises that in the end the righteous “*will look in triumph on their foes.*” Ultimately we will win the game.

Rob Mouw was a senior soccer player in high school when his team from Wheaton, IL, played their state rival. At the very end of the game, Rob broke away and kicked in a tying goal as time expired. The referee signaled a score, and the opposing team protested. Then Rob acknowledged that as he kicked the goal, he saw time run out on the scoreboard clock. With that admission, the referee reversed his call and awarded the game to the other team.

Rob went home after the game and did his homework, not thinking that much about it. But a nationally syndicated sports columnist picked up the story of Rob’s honesty and called him for an interview. Rob said, “I hadn’t done anything that great. For me, acting honestly was just a reflection of Christ in me.” He went on to say, “Every time in your life you have an opportunity to do right, you should be thankful. For a person to know what right is, and then not to do it—that would be a sin. To have won the game—I mean, really, who cares? Doing the right thing is more important. It lets you have peace.”<sup>12</sup>

Following the publication of the column, Rob got a note from former President George Bush (the first one), congratulating him on his integrity. In 1997, Rob was the captain of the Wheaton College soccer team when they won a national championship, and he went on to coach soccer at the college level. He may have lost that game in high school, but he won the victory in life.

Holy people are not perfect. Sometimes we stumble and fall from the path. Often we make mistakes. We are in constant need of forgiveness. But if we stay on the way, if we steadfastly make the choice for God, then we will ultimately win the victory. We will find peace in our

relationship with God. We will know the joy of his eternal home. We will have the satisfaction that our lives made a difference.

These are the keys: generosity, steadfast obedience, and ultimate victory. These keys will open the door to happiness. They will bring us joy everlasting.

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<sup>1</sup> David G. Meyers and Ed Diener, "The Science of Happiness," *The Futurist*, Vol. 31, pp. 6-7.

<sup>2</sup> Psalm 112:1.

<sup>3</sup> Reuben Job, *Three Simple Rules: A Wesleyan Way of Living* (Nashville: Abingdon, 2007)

<sup>4</sup> Psalm 112:5, 9.

<sup>5</sup> Clifton Fadman, ed. *The Little, Brown Book of Anecdotes* (Boston: Little, Brown, 1985), 339.

<sup>6</sup> Todd Hertz, "\$500 Tooth Saves the Day," *Ignite Your Faith* (June 2006), p. 41.

<sup>7</sup> Psalm 112: 4, 8a.

<sup>8</sup> Eugene Peterson, *The Pastor; A Memoir* (New York: HarperCollins, 2011), 247.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.*, 249.

<sup>10</sup> Psalm 112:7-8.

<sup>11</sup> Psalm 112:10.

<sup>12</sup> *Christian Reader*, "Ordinary Heroes" (1995), from *PreachingToday.com*.