

## Spreading Happiness

Advent 2B

Text: Isaiah 58:6–14; 2 Corinthians 6:1–10

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I read with great interest in a front page article in Friday's Los Angeles Times that *happiness is contagious*. Someone has actually done a scientific study to *quantify* this; for example: if your next door neighbor is a happy person, you are 34% more likely to be happy. If you have a friend living within a half-mile who is happy, you are 42% more likely to be happy. Even a friend of a friend who is happy can make you happier by 9.8%.

It was part of a much larger longitudinal study—done over several decades—on a lot of measures of health and well-being, but the analysis shows that happiness can be shared. It can rub off, spill over on you. It can be *contagious*. You can catch happiness, much the same as I caught a head cold a month ago. But there's one difference. I don't know who gave me the head cold, but apparently happiness can only be caught from people you know and relate to closely.

I guess that's an encouragement to surround yourself with good company. If misery loves company, so does happiness. So that's reason enough to hang out with happy people, to find a happier neighborhood, and to make friends with happy people.

Sadly, the opposite also probably works, though this study out of Harvard University and UC–San Diego didn't study it. You can be brought down by hanging out with people who are bummed, depressed, or carry the heavy baggage of life's burdens. I think the mood in Southern California, or California as a whole, is more upbeat and optimistic, if for no other reason than there is more sunshine, and space. We have created a culture for ourselves in which it is possible to be happy. And by the way this new study confirms that happy people tend to live longer, even if they have a chronic illness. Being happy is healthier.

Yet we live in the real world, not the virtual world of celluloid and digital glamor, nor the world of sunny suburbs and shiny new cars. Considering how much bad news hits the papers every day, and the whole history of the human race, you wonder if there ever has been much happiness in any place or

time, in any culture.

I often try to hold together two very different things in my mind, each one tugging at me in opposite directions. Hanging on my left arm is the Bible and the Biblical word, with all its baggage and history and complexity. On the other is the modern world, which relegates the Bible to the book bins of Good Will and the Salvation Army stores. And I admit, it is difficult to hold on to both of these, because the Bible as a whole is not a Manual for Happiness. It contains much that is troubling, sorrowful, painful. You have to look around to find the joy and the happiness, which is why preachers are pretty selective about where we go with the Bible in our sermons.

And I think the run-up to Christmas is as good an example as any. I am not the first to talk on and on about the problems of American materialism, or Santa Claus, or empty Ho-Ho-Ho thinking. I used to have a lapel pin that said: "Jesus is the reason for the season." But then I woke up one day and thought how much of a downer that is, as if to scold people for their happiness at Christmas-time because it's not *Christian-enough*. Christmas can be a season of extravagance, but often there is extravagant generosity. Christmas can be a season of too much rich food and feasting, but it is a season of rich sharing also. This congregation always has trouble paying all its bills, and yet for the past four years we've been able to give gifts to the young people at the Jeff Griffith Youth Center to make their Christmas a little brighter, a little less bleak in a half-way house environment where they are trying to rebuild their lives after leaving the world of drugs, prostitution, unemployment, or just rejection by their families. *Do you want to do this again this year?* We've bought \$25 gift cards at Target for these youth, and every year they and their residential counselors are totally surprised by our kindness and generosity. I know it will be tougher with the depressed state of our economy, but it will be that much tougher on kids in a half-way house environment, too. Maybe we can spread some

happiness.

In the Biblical world—that other environment that tugs at me, and I try to help you pay attention to, depression, poverty, enslavement and violence were never far away. The Chosen People struggled for centuries to preserve their national identity with *none of the trappings* of modern American life, or of the sunny California disposition. Life was supposed to be happy, they thought, because God had promised them blessings. But nothing turned out that way, and it led to a cultural depression, and a cultural self-examination. Today's reading from Isaiah illustrates this, because the national mood was one of shame for their predicament, for their national failure. Their dark mood led them to acts of religious repentance, for example: fasting and outward signs of shame. Dressing in sack-cloth, and rubbing ashes on one's face.

If you read around this passage, the prophet is basically saying, God sees all that stuff, all that sackcloth and ashes, yada yada ya, and God is not impressed. Do you want to be blessed? Turn to God, says the prophet, not with religious ritual that looks like a change of heart, but practice justice and righteousness. Be generous, and hospitable, stop oppressing one another, and open your hearts to your own people.

Then there is this bit of “picture language” that caught my eye. If you do all this really good stuff, says the prophet in verses 8-9, all this righteous stuff and not just the religious stuff:

Then your light shall break forth like the dawn,  
and your healing shall spring up quickly;  
your vindicator shall go before you,  
the glory of the LORD shall be your rear guard.  
Then you shall call, and the LORD will answer;  
you shall cry for help, and he will say, Here I am.

The image of light is compelling here. As we draw closer to Christmas, and the longest night of the year, we are drawn to the light. Even sunny Southern California cannot manufacture more hours of sunshine. No wonder people get depressed. Our modern way of coping with darkness is to string lights from the houses and the trees, and to put up lights inside. But the prophet might be saying to us, in modern times, that is just

so much “mood-making” ritual. If you want to have light in your life, help the poor and the down-and-out. Bring light to others who don't see the light. And even, “*lighten up!*” Live gratefully and generously. Let your own light heart be that source of happiness for others. Let your good spirit, blessed by the Lord who answers prayer, lead you to be the neighbor or the friend, or even the “friend of a friend” who brings light to dissipate somebody else's darkness.

Or as St. Paul advises in the Second Reading, “We urge you also not to accept the grace of God in vain.” In other words, we *know* that we live by God's grace, not by our repentance, sack-cloth and ashes. We know we thrive by God's grace, not by our religiosity. So let's not receive this grace of God *in vain*. In other words, let's not squander it, or hide it under the proverbial bushel basket, or bury it in the ground like the servant who didn't get it when his master entrusted money to him. *Live the grace of God. Put it to work.*

This is a tough one, I know, especially for life-long Lutherans. It is said that in Lutheran churches, if the pastor occasionally tells a really funny joke, that Lutherans will smile very, very loudly!

Lighten *up*, Lutherans! Being faithful does not have to mean being flat. Here's the permission you've been waiting for! Don't worry. Be happy!

This is the season of preparation for Christ. Advent is the time to pick out and wrap our spiritual gifts. Advent is the time to put up our spiritual lights. Advent is the time to put our spiritual cookies in the oven, *not out of duty to God, nor fear of displeasing the Almighty*. Joy and happiness are not turned on like a light on a switch. There is preparation involved, or—as the little box inscription says for that new toy or appliance or tool, *some assembly required*. So get out your spiritual toolkit *and get ready for Christmas* with the tools we have been given: our selves, our time, our good will, our generosity, our means, our hearts. Throw yourselves into Christmas 2008 as if there is no recession of the human spirit!! Live the grace of God, and spread the love and the blessing and the light and the happiness we have been given in the gospel of Jesus Christ ~ spread it around your neighborhood so that it is truly *contagious*. Amen?

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