



Christian Education

A series of Sermons and Occasional Papers
From the clergy and members
of Holy Trinity Church
Forbes Park, Makati

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Title: **"Is Everybody Happy?"**
Comment: Insert Comment here
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Readings for this Sunday:

First Reading Jeremiah 17:5-10
Second Reading 1 Corinthians 15:12-20
Gospel Luke 6:17-26

Is everybody happy? Don't answer that. Not yet.

Today's readings have to do with happiness. That's not immediately apparent from the Gospel reading, though. There, the word that is used is "blessed". But that word doesn't suggest happiness to us anymore- it's too "churchy" a word. Blessed sounds boring, isolated, supernatural. My language study tells me that the word "blessed" has an ancient root that means, "made sacred through the use of blood." That's enough to make us much prefer being happy to being blessed, isn't it? But then we have to look at that word, 'happy', too. We all know what being happy is, don't we?

Probably not. According to my American Heritage Dictionary, happy means being fortunate or lucky. In a common sense that can be a pain both for the "happy" person and everyone around him or her because it suggests something that they have and we don't. The only way we can really rank happiness is by comparing it to unhappiness, usually our own. If everybody's happy, how do we know what happy really is?

An article in 'The Economist' a few months back quoted David Carmeron, a leader of Britain's Conservative Party. He said that the old index of economic health, the GDP or Gross Domestic Product was no longer an accurate gauge of the state of a nation, but rather the GWB, or "general well-being". In America, inequality, overwork and other hidden costs of prosperity have suggested the idea of "wellness" as opposed to health. Both of these concepts suggest that there is more to being happy than being rich, although most people wouldn't realize it.

But the article went on to say that modern western societies have a bad habit of taking luxuries and making them into necessities. Everyone now expects to have the things that only a few years ago were owned only by the very few. Frills that they never thought they would have in their wildest dreams have become essentials they can't do without. Take electricity. Take iPods. Take cell phones. (*Please*, take cell phones!)

That gets us back to another significant point made in the article: that "getting ahead" in terms of wealth and power doesn't help anybody *else*, either. One only becomes successful at the expense of other people. If everyone got the bonus at work, it would be a "leveler"- it wouldn't be a raise, and if everyone were guaranteed a Mercedes Benz, some other car would have to be set up as the exclusive, and limited, goal to shoot for. Our mark of success is the stuff we have that others don't have. Why else do they call it, "getting *ahead*"? Being really generous to the truly needy usually comes only when one's own rank, position and security are fixed.

Looking at happiness from this bleaker standpoint, it is useful to return to the Scripture readings today and to consider those pious "Beatitudes" again: the "Blessèd Be's"- the core of Jesus' famous "Sermon on the Mount." In doing so, however, it serves us to consider what those pronouncements *don't* say about being blessed, or shall we say "happy".

Jesus didn't say:

Happy are those who make more money than others, for that will give their lives meaning.

Jesus didn't say:

Happy are those who live in large houses in gated communities and with domestic helpers, even in the Philippines where people can convince themselves that "everyone else has them."

Jesus didn't say:

Happy are those who see their priorities in terms of 1) self first, 2) immediate family second, 3) extended family a distant third and everyone else totally off the radar screen except when it serves the interest of the self [see 1) above].

What the sayings of Jesus so say about happiness sounds downright odd:

If you're poor now, you're happy.

If you're hungry now, you're happy.

If you're crying now, you're happy.

If people hate you now, you're happy.

Jesus is trying to tell us something about the dangers of satisfaction according to the world's standards. And the flip side of the coin is equally disturbing, especially for those who want to preach a "Gospel of Success". It also shows that the people in Jesus' audience weren't all poor...and He knew it! There were wealthy, comfortable, respectable people on that hill that day. And what did they hear?

If you're rich, watch out- that's not being happy.

If you're full, watch out- that's not being happy.

If you're laughing, watch out- that's not being happy.

If you're popular...boy- watch out- you won't be happy for long!

These things turn our ideas of happiness on their head and remind us of a very important part of Jesus teaching, and of the Christian lifestyle. Being full isn't the same as being *fulfilled*. The ideals that Jesus outlines are meant to shock us into realizing that He didn't come into the world to confirm our illusions about life or to grant our every wish. "I came that they may have *life*," He said, "and have it abundantly." But the abundance He's talking about isn't a bank account. That's not *life*. The depth of the fulfillment that God offers isn't found in what we *own*, but in how we *live*. It isn't the same as settling for second-best, but rather it's discovering what is best for us in God's eyes. His abundance is found when we accept His love, not when we hide from it in what we own.

For generations, some preachers have tried to *please* their audiences by telling them that Jesus wants them to be happy in all the ways that the world says one should be: wealth, power, influence, children, and lots and lots of "things." The best preachers, though, will stick to what the Master actually said...and will carefully note what He did *not* say. There one will find precious little about money and power being the sign of God's favor, or even of the benefits to the Church of having rich members putting pledges in the plate. What one will find is a sense of fulfillment coming from standing for something worthwhile- something that demands sacrifice and a sense of priorities based on a calling to make life meaningful for all, beginning with those who have the least. In fact, the real Jesus has very little but warning for the rich and successful if they're not sharing their wealth generously. Do you think He might know something that we don't?

It is significant, I think, that our first reading today also mentions the word "blessed", used in the same way that Jesus does in the Beatitudes. In the 17th chapter of Jeremiah, the prophet writes, "Blessed are those who trust in the Lord." By putting ourselves in the hands of God, even a God whom we may not always understand, just might make us blessed.

Is everybody happy? Probably not. But I hope that everybody leaves here today with something to think about: the search for fulfillment: what that can really mean, and how we can achieve it. That would be a happy ending.