

A Joyful, Contagious...

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Sermon Series: A Community With Vision

Philippians 4:4-7

You mean to tell me two-thirds of the people at “Happy Hour” aren’t really happy?

Americans have always had a thing about happiness. Our Declaration of Independence declares that Americans are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights; among them are the rights of “life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness.”

We Americans are obsessed with happiness. Yet, happiness for most of us remains elusive. According to the Pew Research Center, only one-third of Americans identify themselves as “very happy.” You mean to tell me two-thirds of the people at “Happy Hour” aren’t really happy?

You could have fooled me by what I watch on TV. The people who drink Bud Lite Beer and shower with Dial soap seem so serenely happy.

When our kids were small, they used to lobby for McDonalds fast food for every meal. They begged us to dine at McDonalds so they could enjoy their “Happy Meals,” served with the latest dinosaur stamp or action figure. Leave it to McDonalds to capitalize on our American fixation on happiness. McDonalds has convinced us that we are not only buying burgers and fries, we’re buying happiness, too. Do our children really have McDonalds-shaped vacuums in their souls that only Ronald McDonald can fill?

Happy Meals don’t deliver what they promise. Somewhere near the end of the meal, the happiness wears off.

Now, we adults know better. We know Happy Meals do not deliver happiness. Or do we? As we become older, our Happy Meals become more expensive. We continue to look for external variables to make us happy.

The world of MTV, Access Hollywood and People Magazine keeps telling us happiness is found in material gratification and good sex. Happiness is a new car, a hefty raise, a new relationship or an extravagant cruise.

We keep looking for happiness in all the wrong places. We want romantic relationships or new possessions to make us happy. We will never find happiness by looking for it in people, places and things.

Helen Keller wrote, “Many people have the wrong idea of what constitutes true happiness. It is not attained through self-gratification but through fidelity to a worthy purpose.”

Happy derives from the Middle English word “hap,” which equates with a happening or circumstance. Happiness relies on happenstance to make people happy.

The Bible does not use the word “happy” very often. It utilizes another word, joy. Biblical joy

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does not depend on external situations to induce happiness. Even if our outward circumstances are disintegrating, the Bible asserts it's still possible for people to remain joyful.

In this regard, I direct you to our morning scripture lesson. Paul's letter to the Philippians radiates joy. Joy and its cognate, rejoice, are found 16 times within a span of four chapters.

What you need to know is that Paul composed this letter when he was in prison (Philippians 1:7, 13-14, 17). Paul will stand trial for professing allegiance to another Lord besides Caesar. If Paul is found guilty, his verdict will result in a swift execution.

You might expect Paul to be depressed by such a grim prospect. But notice in our scripture lesson, the source of Paul's joy is not his external circumstances; his joy is in the Lord. Paul writes, "Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say rejoice" (4:4). Later, in verse 10, he repeats these same words: "Rejoice in the Lord."

Paul expresses joy over God the Father's unconditional love for people. He radiates joy for God the Son's gracious act of salvation. He manifests joy for God the Spirit's indwelling presence.

What is the source of your delight? Do you delight in God? There is no greater joy and no more lasting fulfillment than the joy God gives to people. It's no use asking God to make us happy any other way. Since God is infinite and eternal, there is noth-

ing outside of God that can make us happy. God is the greatest joy in the world.

John Piper writes in his book *Desiring God*, "God is most glorified in us when we are most satisfied in him." St. Augustine expresses this same thought with the immortal words, "Thou hast made us for thyself and our hearts are restless until they find their rest in Thee, O Lord."

God offers us infinite joy, but we deceive ourselves into thinking we can find happiness in some inferior endeavor. C. S. Lewis writes in *Mere Christianity*, "Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased."

We long for wish fulfillment. Some of us wish we had a boyfriend or girlfriend. Some of us wish we were married or single or married to someone else. Some of us wish we had more money in the bank or a lived in a bigger home. Some of us wish our kids were Ivy League or Major League. Some of us wish we could have children. I tell you, all of us long for something more. External circumstances will not make people happy. Only God can make us happy. You may not have all you want, but God is enough!

“For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting [fun!]”

- John 3:16

Living for Jesus Christ is the most rewarding way to live. I mentioned earlier the Pew Research Center’s study of happiness among Americans. One of its findings is that people who attend worship are significantly happier than those who don’t attend worship. God may not always be a back-slapping good time, but there is a serene sense of joy that comes from knowing and serving God.

Some people imagine God to be some killjoy, who wants to take all the fun out of life. Nothing could be further from the truth. There is no greater delight and no more sublime joy than knowing and serving Jesus Christ.

Doug Vogel from Fort Wayne, Indiana, decided to teach his four-year-old son Caleb his first Bible verse. The verse he chose to teach his son was John 3:16. “For God so loved the world that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting life.” Doug recited the verse slowly several times to his young son. He then spoke the verse more slowly still, encouraging Caleb to fill in certain words. When he got to the end of the verse, to the words, “shall not perish but have everlasting [blank],” Caleb answered proudly, “fun!” “For God so loved the world, that he gave his one and only Son, that whoever believes in him shall not perish but have everlasting fun!” Doug said, “I couldn’t have said it better myself.” There is no greater joy and supreme delight than knowing and serving Jesus Christ.

On the upper right hand corner of your bulletin cover, you’ll find our church’s vision statement. You may be acquainted with our three core beliefs: “Jesus is Lord, Scripture is our authority and everyone is called to discipleship.” You may know our mission, “to call people to faith, to equip people for ministry and to send people into mission to love and serve.” But you’re likely unfamiliar with our vision statement, which is the focus of our Lenten sermons and one another groups. Our vision is to be “Joyful, contagious, Christ-centered community committed to loving and serving God and neighbors.”

We’re not the only organization around that utilizes a vision statement. Wendy’s displays its vision statement in its restaurants: “Our vision is to be a quality leader in everything we do.” WalMart advertises its vision statement: “Quality goods at low prices, responsive manufacturing and opportunities for growth. We’re dedicated to excellence in every part of our business.” Amazon.com articulates their vision with the words, “Our vision is to be Earth’s most customer-centric company: to build a place where people can come to find and discover anything they might want to buy on-line.”

We deliberately picked the adjective “joyful” to introduce our vision statement, because joy is a signature word to describe the Christian life. It also happens to be a word in short supply in today’s church. German pastor and theologian Helmut Thielicke writes, “I fear...we Christians often represent

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- Friedrich Nietzsche

our Lord very badly. The glum, sour faces of many Christians who frequently look as if they had gallstones (all those who really have gallstones will excuse me!). They rather give the impression that, instead of coming from the Father’s joyful banquet, they have just come from the sheriff who has auctioned off their sins and now they are sorry they can’t get them back again.”

Friedrich Nietzsche made this poignant observation: “You will have to look more redeemed if I am to believe in your redeemer.”

The greatest witness for Christianity is Christians, when we are joyful, contagious witnesses for Jesus Christ. But the greatest witness against Christianity is also Christians, when we are joyless and uncommunicative in our witness for Christ.

We sometimes worship with long faces and sad dispositions. We sing the Doxology as though it was a dirge. We recite the Great Thanksgiving as though it was a mournful occasion for introspection rather than a joyous foretaste of the Great Heavenly Banquet.

Our greatest joy is in the Lord. This joy is contagious. When we are happy, we can’t help but share our joy. Good news is for sharing. Whoever is truly happy makes other people happy.