

Happiness Is...
Psalm 32

Way back when some of us here were kids, the Peanuts cartoon strip assured us that "Happiness is a warm puppy."

Apparently that didn't turn out to be a very satisfactory answer for some because a number of studies have been done to try to determine the true secret to happiness; if not a warm puppy, just what it is that *does* make people happy? There are even studies, or at least polls, that try to determine which town or state or country is the happiest place to live, or at least where the people seem to be the happiest, and from that, determine what the commonality is. Journalist Eric Weiner wrote a book called *The Geography of Bliss: One Grump's Search for the Happiest Places in the World.* Testing one assumption, that money has something to do with happiness, he went to Qatar, as he said, "I went there specifically to examine what happens when the entire country wins the lottery." He found the wealth made the residents comfortable, but also degraded their level of contentment. It turns out that "most of our happiness is derived from our relationships with other people," Weiner said. "The money in Qatar has allowed them to wall themselves off, literally and figuratively, from other people. ... That's not a recipe for happiness." That probably goes along way towards explaining why one study found that cold, dark Norway is the happiest place on earth to live.

So what about you? What do you need to be happy? What stands between you and happiness? Some people might say that what would make them happy is better health, not being in pain, or being better looking, or having less stress in life and more free time, maybe having a soul mate, or a best friend.

Psalm 32 gives us a very different answer: happiness is being forgiven.

That means the flip side of that is that what keeps us from being happy isn't stress, or an empty wallet, or pain, or loneliness. What keeps us from being happy is sin.

Now, that may not be a word you are used to hearing in a Presbyterian church. We've gotten out of the habit of talking about sin in the church. Partly that's been a reaction to browbeatings some of us took in other churches, and in part because we've just learned to call it other things: mistakes, personal weaknesses, struggles, errors in judgment. And some of the things we used to call 'sin' we've learned to just look the other way and call it someone's own personal business. Barbara Brown Taylor thinks that it was a PR move, both for God and the church. People just didn't like it. She writes that we did away with sin "in order to make worship a more positive experience... when we speak of God we go straight for the grace." (Speaking of Sin, pg.)

I think there's another reason we don't talk about it – it's just too hard for us to go there. It's too hard to admit what kind of person we really are inside; the pain and heartache we have caused, or allowed to happen, the meanness that we are capable of. It's hard to own

up to the anger that lives inside of us, or that we are unbelievably selfish and live for ourselves and our own pleasure. It's hard to come clean about the messes that we have made because we are afraid of conflict, or failure, or losing face. And so what do we do? We bury it deep; maybe even lie to cover it up. We blame someone else. We compare ourselves to others and say that while we may not be perfect at least we aren't terrorists, or drug abusers, or tax evaders, or adulterers, or promiscuous.

Or maybe, even though you don't talk about it, even though you don't name it out loud, you'd never admit what you've done and who you are, you can't let go, you wallow in it, you're stuck.

The problem is, mishandling or mislabeling sin doesn't make it go away. You can call it what you want, you can pretend that it isn't there or it isn't that bad, but it's still there. Taylor writes that "human beings will continue to experience alienation, deformation, damnation and death, no matter what we call them." Sin is real, and its effects are real. That's right, effects. Ignored sin not only doesn't go away all by itself, it eats away at you. It festers. The psalmist writes that as long as he kept quiet about his sin, as long as he tried to hide it or ignore it, it made a wreck of his life. He experienced physical symptoms. His guilt made him sick. The well-known psychiatrist, Karl Menninger actually wrote a book called *Whatever Became of Sin* and writes that "many former sins became crimes," and symptoms of illnesses he was called on to treat. Our lives become the living hell we thought we were avoiding by trying to pretend we were perfect.

But guess what? We aren't expected. You might think you should be perfect. Other people might think you should be perfect. But God doesn't. What God is looking for isn't for you to obey all the rules. What God is looking for is honesty. Confession. Kathleen Norris tells the story of a little boy who writes a poem called "The Monster Who was Sorry," about what happens when his father yells at him. In his poem he reacts by knocking his sister down the stairs and wrecking his room, and then wrecking the whole town. "The poem concludes, 'then I sit in my messy house and say to myself, 'I shouldn't have done all that.' She writes, "'my messy house' says it all: with more honesty than most adults could have mustered, the boy makes a metaphor for himself that admitted the depth of his rage and also gave him a way out.'" He realized what a mess he had made, and he was sorry.

The man we call the prodigal son might well have written a similar poem about the mess that he had made, and the sober wish that he had not done it. With great simplicity Luke writes instead that he 'came to himself,' he realized the harm that he had done to his relationship with his father and the pain he had brought everyone and the mess that his life had become, and he went home to say he was sorry. And what happens then is exactly what the psalmist is trying to get at. You and I are afraid that our honesty will get us nothing but more pain and punishment and estrangement, but look what happens instead: A party is given. Barbeque is eaten! There is great celebration. Broken relationships are restored. The private hell of guilt and secrecy and shame is taken away and replaced with happiness and joy.

One night when I was on call at the hospital I was paged to the intensive care unit to see a patient who was about to go to surgery, not an unusual call. What was unusual, though, is that the man was a prison inmate and he had been hospitalized after he was assaulted by another inmate and hit over the head with a piece of metal. What he wanted, essentially, was to make confession. Even before the assault he had come to understand what a mess he had made of his life, how he had set a bad example for his younger brother, who had followed his footsteps into drug use and a life of crime, and hadn't been around to look after his mother, who was in poor health herself. He was agitated and talked non-stop for well over an hour, which I just assumed was the result of his trauma or anxiety about the surgery. And then we prayed. We prayed about his surgery, we prayed for the inmate who attacked him, and we prayed for forgiveness for all of the terrible things he had done, even the not-so-terrible things he had done. And after the 'amen,' after he had been assured that God is merciful and gracious and had forgiven everything, all of it, he was still. He was quiet. And after a few minutes he told me that it would be okay for me to go, that he knew that something was different, something had changed. A great burden had been lifted and he felt at peace, even knowing what lay ahead for him. He was sick, he was going back to prison, but he was forgiven.

What stands between you and happiness? Chances are it isn't a prison sentence, or a crime. But it probably is because you have not loved your God with your whole heart, mind and strength, and because of your selfish appetites, and your pride, hypocrisy and impatience, some of the things we just confessed to a few minutes ago. Maybe your failure to be a good friend or hurtful words you've said at home.

The words Rick said to you just a short time ago should have made your heart glad, though. If you weren't just saying the words, if you weren't daydreaming, if you really understood what a mess you have made of your lives and meant what you said, then those are no loner burdens you need to be carrying. God has forgiven you, and taken that guilt as far away from you as east is from west. They are gone. History, and in God's eyes, you are clean, righteous. What an amazing gift. Let the celebration begin.