

DEEP HAPPINESS

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*Gracious God,
Let these words be more than words and give us the spirit of Jesus.
Amen.*

Some of you know that I experienced the beginning of a spiritual awakening when I was eighteen years old. One of the outcomes of that event was a strong desire for certain portions of our holy text. I was deeply drawn to Jesus as he's presented in the gospels; the radical outsider and gracious lover of souls. On the other hand, I was put off by Paul – he seemed staid, conventional, puritanical, and bossy. The last line in today's epistle would have driven me up the wall – "make no provision for the flesh" (or, in another translation, "make no provision for human nature"). None? Really?

Well, that negative response is not surprising for a kid born in Berkeley and raised there in the 60's. But now, at fifty-two, I still love our iconoclastic Messiah and I have a new appreciation for Paul, and especially for Paul as pastor. That's how I take today's epistle; not as The Word of God! (cue the thunder) but as a godly word that helps us faithfully manage our lives. Wake up. Salvation is very near. Put on the armor of light. Live honorably. Release reveling and drunkenness, debauchery and licentiousness, quarreling and jealousy. Put on the Lord Jesus Christ.

That's sound counsel for mature Christians. Some spiritual leaders suggest that deep happiness is the proper goal of human existence. Paul, today, marks the path to that end. Deep happiness is not found in egocentric excess or by walking on the wild side or by throwing a party for the least healthy aspects of human nature. For Paul, deep happiness is found in following the Nazarene in a spirit of quiet humility and gentle discipline.

Now I'm guessing that the first people to receive this letter were somewhat puzzled by it. If "Rome", the HBO series, was in any way historically accurate then reveling, drunkenness, debauchery, licentiousness, quarreling and jealousy were predictable and accepted parts of everyday pagan life. This new teaching called the Romans to be in their world in a very different way; anyone who took Paul's advice would quickly and radically re-orient their life and their relationship to their larger community.

One person who did take this counsel to heart was a man named Augustine. His father was pagan, his mother Christian. He was born in the fourth century and educated at Carthage. He was tremendously learned, erudite, sophisticated and miserable. He was drawn to the faith of his mother but unable to commit. His human appetites were stronger than his spiritual desire – a few wild oats left unsown, apparently. Here now is his description of his state of mind: "My inner self was a house divided... I was frantic, overcome by violent anger with myself for not accepting your will and entering into your covenant... To make the journey, and to arrive safely, no more was required than an act of will. But it must be a resolute and whole-hearted act of the will, not some lame

wish which I kept turning over and over in my mind, so that it had to wrestle with itself, part of it trying to rise, part falling to the ground.”

Torn by competing desires and in spiritual agony, Augustine retired for a moment to a nearby garden. There he heard a child’s sing-song voice urging him to “Take it and read, Take it and read.” He understood this to be a divine command; he opened the Bible randomly and his eyes fell on today’s passage (Romans 13:13 to be precise – reveling, drunkenness, licentiousness, etc.). His life was instantly transformed. Everything that held him back fell away. Every impediment, every fear, every snare, every hesitation vanished. He made the leap of faith; confidence flooded his heart and the darkness of doubt was dispelled.

As this happened, all of Augustine’s education and erudition and insight and rhetorical firepower and philosophical sophistication and Spirit-led wisdom were made available to God in Christ. He became our preeminent theologian; he wasn’t right about every issue, he wasn’t perfect even after his conversion, he could be as prissy as Paul on his fussiest day, he made some Himalayan blunders based on the wisdom of the moment, but millions of souls are now indebted to him, including ours.

Augustine’s conversion pivoted on his willingness to enter into the paschal rhythm of letting go and taking on. And the same is true for us – we release and we receive. Note that every one of our readings today reflects that rhythm. Note also that these lessons, though they deal with end-times, are not dire but hopeful. Isaiah looks forward to the end of bitter exile and the perfect realization of God’s will; Zion is restored, the Lord reigns, peace prevails, swords become plowshares and spears pruning hooks. In our gospel, Jesus declares that no one knows when the end will come but the people of God are ever-prepared, awake, alert. And again, Paul anticipates the end – he believes it to be very near - so he teaches a sound, sane ethical norm for those who await it.

Letting go and taking on, releasing and receiving - that’s our story. We proclaim faith in a God who commands the old to pass away in order for the new to come to be. End-times are critical, necessary, but never final – that’s the key. So what, in your life, needs to be put away? What needs to be set aside? Perhaps it was useful at one time but doesn’t serve any longer. And what needs to be taken on? What needs to be claimed or reclaimed, resurrected for the purpose of deep happiness and godly living? If something burdensome could come to an end today, would you let it go? If something delightful were to enter your life this morning, would you be able to take it in? Is there space for it?

Ponder all that as I conclude now with a pastoral caveat. When I offer up questions like these, I do so with the expectation that useful change is often subtle. Augustine’s story is dramatic – yours may be too – but not every spiritual state needs to be felt so feverishly. When people tell me that a sermon helped them leave their marriage, quit their job, sell their house and pack up for the Congo, I tend to draw back a step. Small changes that we stay with over time usually do more to bring deep happiness into our lives than lurching plunges into the unknown.

So with that in mind, we invite you to observe a holy Advent – study your life, wake up and watch for the Lord, embrace quiet humility and gentle discipline, honor both end-times and new creations, releasing and receiving, pursue your deepest happiness, and do all that in the Name of the One who is hastening to you even now. Amen.