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Can you be happy all the time?
Washington, D.C.

May 7th, 2023.
Georgetown Presbyterian Church
Luke 17:11-19

On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

The Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Donald Rumsfeld once said, "There are known knowns. There are things we know we know. We also know there are known unknowns. That is to say, we know there are some things we do not know. But there are also unknown unknowns, the ones we don't know we don't know." Questions of faith probably fall into these categories: things we know. Things we know we don't know. And things we don't even know to ponder in our tiny little heads. Thank you for trusting us with some of your questions of faith for our Pew to Pulpit Series. Today's question comes from our youngest contributor: he is seven years old and wrote: *Dear Pastor Camille, can you to be happy all the time?* I learned from his mom that one of the songs we sing with the children has been making him wonder and even a little bit concerned.

Maybe some of you know the old favorite Sunday school song that goes, "I'm inright outright upright downright happy all the time." It continues, "Since Jesus Christ came in, and cleansed my heart from sin, I'm inright outright upright downright, happy all the time." We sing it faster and faster and faster until everything goes off the rails. It is fun to sing but my young friend is asking me if it is theologically sound. Can we be, should we be happy, all the time?

The short answer is no. I am sorry to say that the pursuit of perpetual happiness is not the chief aim of the Christian life. Our lives are far too rich and complicated for such steady state existence. Things are going to happen to you that will knock you off the happiness balance beam. Your little brother will smash the Lego set you have been building for weeks. Your best friend will move to Australia. You will get a bad grade on an important test. You will crash your dad's car. Someone is going to break your heart. Anger, sadness, regret, guilt, and loneliness will visit you thereby sending happiness on a long vacation to a faraway land.

This is all to be expected and it is important to know that it does not reflect on the condition of your faith or your relationship with Jesus.

You are correct in questioning the moral teaching of that song. We should not be teaching the children of the church that constant happiness is the goal of the Christian. Jesus doesn't teach that in the Bible. And if we trick you into some sappy Precious Moments version of the Christian life then when the inevitable bumps in the road come you will be totally ill equipped to handle them.

You would graduate from GPC humming your “in right out right up right down right happy all the time” tune and then you would get to the real world and be sorely disappointed. You would never graduate from college because no one is happy all the time in college. You would never hold down a job because no one is happy every day to go to work. You would never be able to commit to a long-term relationship because no one is happy every day in their marriages.

The last written work that C.S. Lewis wrote before his death in 1963 was an opinion piece for the Saturday Evening Post titled, “We Have No Right to Happiness.” In this piece, Lewis was making a moral argument for how one is to approach decision making. He says if we make decisions on the assumption that we have a right to happiness, then we will likely be guided by the wrong instincts. Lewis says, “A right to happiness doesn’t, for me, make much more sense than a right to be six feet tall, or have a millionaire for your father, or to get good weather whenever you want to have a picnic.”

Jesus Christ coming in and forgiving our sins does not guarantee our happiness. It will change your life but not in that specific way. Jesus in your life will give you strength and grace every morning amid the struggles of life. Jesus in your life means you will never find yourself utterly alone. Jesus in your life means you have a foundation to stand on when the world feels shaky and hard and scary. We should not try to fool ourselves into thinking life should be perfect, rather we should strive to equip ourselves for what is universal in life, which is suffering. The life of Jesus was a demonstration of how to stay grounded in your faith when you suffer.

I scoured the Bible for happiness texts and came up short. A few here and there from the proverbs or the psalmist but Jesus is not preaching a gospel of happiness. In his longest sermon, the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus uses the word blessed to describe what it is like to live fully in the kingdom of God...blessed are the poor in spirit, blessed are those who mourn, blessed are the meek, blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, the merciful, the pure in heart, the peacemakers, the persecuted.

Some biblical translations have swapped out the word blessed for happy – happy are those who...but it just doesn’t translate. My seven-year-old friend knows this well, you aren’t happy when people persecute you and bully you, you aren’t happy when you mourn the loss of your grandparent, you aren’t happy when you see bad things happening in the world. But during those things if you can keep your faith and your relationship with Jesus then kingdom living is possible. Faithfulness was Christ’s chief aim and so it should be ours.

Kate Bowler and Jessica Richie recently released a book of Prayers titled *The Lives We Actually Have – 100 Blessings for Imperfect Days*. The sections in the book alone capture the rich and diverse experiences of humanity. The prayers are split into these sections: Bless this ordinary life. Bless this tired life. Bless this lovely life. Bless this grief-stricken life. Bless this overwhelming life. Bless this painful life. Bless this garbage life. Bless the lives of others. Bless this beautiful, limited life. Bless this holy life. The prayers are honest and raw. They connect with real experiences of lives and as you can tell, there is no expectation of happiness all the time. There is, however, an expectation of God showing up during it all, God’s presence is pervasive.

Five years ago, something very difficult happened in my life. Those of you who were around then remember when my house in Georgetown caught on fire and the chaos of the following months. Everything in the house was damaged either by fire, water, or smoke. One of the things that was the hardest to throw out was my children's toys. Some of the plastic ones looked fine on the surface. They were the things that brought my children joy – toy figures, riding cars, a stroller for a doll. How could I throw away sources of happiness for them?

Well, the answer was I couldn't do it. So, along with the help of some of my GPC friends, we hauled those toys over to the church. And a group of helpers cleaned the heck out of those toys. They bleached them. They scrubbed them. They poured love and hope into them. And you know what, when they were finished, despite a lingering heavy odor of the cleaning products, the toys still reeked of smoke. They couldn't be saved. Thinking back on it, I bet every single one of those people, cleaning those toys, knew they would all need to be thrown away. Reluctantly, I let them go.

We can't be happy all the time. And as much as parents would like to do so, they cannot protect their kids from difficult experiences. While I did not expect a house fire, I was not surprised by the experience of suffering. No one told me I would live happily ever after. I did not learn in church that I had a right to expect happiness all the time. That is a good thing because it means that your faith can hold up on the tired days, the grief-stricken days, the painful days, the garbage days. Maybe we should put that on our church website, "We build robust lives of faith for the garbage days of our lives."

I picked the story of the ten lepers as our text for the day because it has something to teach us about how to approach this life of ours. Ten lepers were sick, and Jesus healed them all. One of them chose to return to Jesus to thank him. We assume they all suffered greatly because of their illness and all of them cried out to Jesus for mercy. All of them experienced joy in their healing but only one expressed his gratitude. In our suffering, we must cry out to God for mercy. In your joy, we must offer praise to God. We are called to stay relationship with Jesus through the non-linear ways our lives unfold, for Jesus provides you a foundation that will keep you. Not keep you happy, not even always keep you safe but God will keep you.

Can you be happy all the time? No, my young friend, I'm so sorry but that is not how things will go? This is a known known. The unknown knowns are just how your little life will unfold in beautiful and holy ways. The unknown unknowns, the things, that we don't know we don't know – are all the holy mysterious ways of the God who created you and sustains you and loves you. Your heart cannot comprehend the unknown unknowns but someday, we trust all shall be revealed.

And on that day, I pray that you will feel like your faith kept you. That is my hope – that each of you will be kept close to God, and that your faith would bless your beautiful, limited, holy lives. May it be so.

Amen.

