

Psalm 1
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“Happiness: It Takes Practice”

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At age 6 I had major surgery to repair an issue I had from birth. During my stay at Children’s Hospital of Wisconsin my family was so wonderful to me. Mom spent the night with me, Dad was always there, my brother brought thoughtful little gifts and played with me. My grandparents, aunts, uncles, friends... everyone was great. One of the gifts I received from my Mother’s Mom was a felt banner which we hung on the wall of my room to help decorate. I still have it and it hangs in our music listening room at home.

The banner has a big cut out of Charlie Brown’s dog “Snoopy” glued to it, wearing his Pilot’s goggles Snoopy is standing and holding a sign that says, in permanent ink, “Happiness is ...” Then there is a blank where I can insert any answer I want. Back in the Hospital it would change daily. One day: Happiness is walking again. The next it was eating solid foods again. On the day Miss Wisconsin visited I changed it to -- Happiness is a visit from Miss Wisconsin. The day Ronald McDonald visited happiness was a visit from him. Another day happiness is good doctors and nurses, and on the last day... Happiness is going home.

In Psalm 1 we hear about two paths, the path of the righteous and the path of the wicked. The path of the righteous leads to happiness, and the other to perishing. We may find ourselves intrigued about this path of happiness and it’s promised prosperity because when we look around at the world all too often it looks like the wicked prosper and the righteous suffer. If we don’t take a closer look at these ideas and how the author is using them, they become naïve, bumper sticker, wishful thinking.

A few of you have heard me lately quoting author Bo Lozoff. Bo was an influential person in the work of The Rev. Dr. Fred Rogers, host of PBS’s “Mister Roger’s Neighborhood.” Bo Lozoff died in 2012, but left his mark on many as an American writer and interfaith humanitarian. Bo and his wife Sita studied the interconnections of wisdom and spirituality which are shared among many different world religions. Together they co-founded several non-profits... many aimed to improve the lives of prisoners and the previously incarcerated.

In his book [It’s A Meaningful Life: It Just Takes Practice](#), Bo discusses some of the modern notions we have come to accept about happiness; which, instead of truly providing happiness these paths prey upon our desires and fears and lead us down a spiral of temporary happiness. We hear these messages a thousand times a day, “Eat this, drink this, do this, drive this, buy this, take this pill, and you will be happy.” This kind of message results from a consumer mentality that wants us to believe we can buy happiness. He illustrates it simply, “When I bite into that ice cream cone dipped in chocolate- ah delicious! I am a happy man. But is there a cone in the world big enough to keep me happy for more than a few minutes?” This consumption approach is one of the great barriers to natural and deep joy.

Psalm 1 defines happiness in a way we may not expect. Happiness comes from being constantly centered and grounded in trusting God to guide and sustain our life under all circumstances. Happiness calls us to be constantly growing in awareness; deepening the sense of our lives belonging to God, drawing our security from the assurance that our future is secured by God.

When we turn to Jesus we see this picture of happiness even clearer. Jesus reveals that persecution and suffering are not incompatible with happiness. He lives the way of righteousness yet he is tempted, he suffers, he is even murdered unjustly. He reveals a life of happiness based in connection and openness to God and finds himself sustained by that connection to God amid every threat.

So how do we do this? How do we grow more fully aware of our connection with God? How do we seek this happiness centered in trusting God when everything around us is working to convince us happiness is just our next trip to the store away? Perhaps some have given up on the possibility of lasting happiness? Circumstances in life cause us to conclude that abiding happiness isn't really possible.

In these closing minutes I want to look at the subtitle of Bo Lozoff's book, "It Just Takes Practice." There is an old wisdom story about a King who is wearing full battle armor as he rushes in to see the Buddha. The King said, "O Enlightened one, I am on my way to war and it is very possible I may be killed. So I am in need of your deepest spiritual teachings. However, I must hurry or my soldiers will lose their courage. Can you sum up all your teachings in one word?" The Buddha replies, "Awareness."

There are numerous practices out there to help us grow in awareness. There are many Spiritual practices like walking a labyrinth, chanting, and meditation just to name a few. Bo looks at this idea of spiritual practices widely, he writes, "I could characterize nearly any spiritual practice as simply this: identify and quit, identify and quit, identify and quit. Identify the myriad forms of limitation and delusion we place upon ourselves, and muster the courage to quit each one. Little by little, deep inside us, the diamond shines, the eyes open, the dawn rises, we become what we already are."

Speaking about meditation the author adds, "Meditation is not about doing anything, religious or otherwise; it is about the long, patient struggle to stop doing everything... gradually freeing the mind from all thoughts so that we may experience what Carl Jung called, "The Universal Mind." This is the ability to move beyond ourselves—leaving behind all our personal judgements, biases, and the scores we think we need to settle with life." The Universal Mind, is another way of saying, "growing our awareness of our deep connection to God. The author concludes, "Meditation can be a most revolutionary act because it leads us to see reality and acknowledge it with bare honesty... We stop relying so much on external authority. We see the truth of our nature, and therefore the truth of all human nature, and we have the opportunity to follow that truth regardless of cultural fads, fashions, or fears."

If we look at Psalm 1 and the metaphor of the Tree planted by streams of water. The righteous, the happy ones... are like this tree because no matter what storms may arise, no matter what illness may strike, no matter the harshness of the change of seasons, no matter what... that stream of God's ever flowing grace and mercy is fresh every moment and it becomes the very ground in which we grow our roots, nourish our trunks, strengthen our branches, and bring to life the leaves of abundant, and eternal life.

If you think you might be looking for a new practice to help you find balance in life, to help you become more centered in God, I hope you will sign up for the LIFE Balance Workshop next Sunday. I have a prayerful sense you will engage in conversations and reflection which will invite you to develop life giving practices which will help you grow in happiness.

Amen