



LESSONS for LIFE

March 2, 2008

HAPPINESS NOW

EXTERNAL CHALLENGES

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SACRED READINGS

Lesson: Excerpts from *Happiness Now* by Robert Holden

Gospel: Matthew 22: 36 - 40

We're in the midst of a sermon series during this season of Lent called *Happiness Now*, trying to discover how we can fulfil the scriptural call to us that says *Rejoice always, again I say rejoice*; and we're using as a tool in this series a book by Robert Holden called *Happiness Now*. When we began the series we learned that the search for happiness, as long as it's a search outside of ourselves is unlikely to yield the kind of ongoing joyful life that's meant for us. Yes, we'll experience momentary times of happiness but true happiness comes when we look within instead of outside. We also learned in this series, at the beginning, that happiness is not a set of circumstances; it's not about things around us. It's about a set of attitudes and those attitudes begin with the foundational one that all of us are created in the image of God and that which is of God is in us as well. We learned that the essence of who we are, created in the image of God, is that love and peace and joy had been placed within us at birth; that is our birth-right, it is the essence of who we are. We learned that at birth we begin this process, a natural process – as Marcus Borg calls it – a process of growing independence; or as Robert Holden talks about it, as increasing separateness as we begin to move away from our source – a natural process.

Last week we took a look at the concept of being born anew or being born again and the scriptural meaning of that, trying to separate it from the fundamentalist perspective; the scriptural meaning of what it means to be born again. It means to make a decision to reconnect with your source, to go back to that place, to remember that place that we came from; that place of love and peace and joy. Today I want us to take a look at what are some of the negative and positive influencers, things that can influence us but don't have to be determinative of who we are. I mentioned when I first started this series that I got this book just before I went on vacation last Fall and it was pretty exciting. I went away by myself for two weeks and had the book and could just relax and rest and read and think about the principles in the book. Part way through that time away I wanted to get out and so I decided to go out to a local gay bar that was having a drag show that evening, and I love drag shows! Some people say, "obviously" (as he posed in his vestments!). I love drag shows, I love the energy, the excitement – I love it, So I went out to this bar on that night and it was packed with hundreds of people. It was one of the most professional shows that I'd ever seen. So there I was, enjoying this high and I did happen to look around the room a bit and I noticed that I was probably one of the oldest people in the room. A little later on in the evening, about four or five gay men were walking by they were quite inebriated and one of them, as he was passing by me, tripped and bumped into me and he looked up and he said, "Sorry Gramps!" (laughter). Now, I happen to be a gay man with all of the vanity that comes with that and I must admit, for a second or so, maybe not even that much, there was a deep, deep place of pain in that; and, being there again, by myself, it was just a split second of pain and then quickly I remembered what I'd been reading and studying; and quickly I thought, *that's about him and not about me; that within me is love and peace and joy and I don't need to go to that woe is me sad place*. Now his friends were horrified at what he had said and they quickly grabbed him



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and moved him along. So I was feeling quite wonderful that I was able to get to a place very quickly of being able to connect with who I was and my own love and peace and joy. Now I have to admit that later on in the evening, when they were coming by again, and his friends made sure that he was not near me – and he probably lost some friendships over that – probably when they realized what he'd said and done. But anyway, they were bringing him back by me and for a split second I thought, *What would it be like if I just stuck my foot out and tripped him as he walked by?* But then I got back to love and peace and joy (laughter) and decided not to do that.

So there may be little things like that which can be negative influencers in our lives, but they do not have to be determinative of whom we are. How many times has somebody said something cutting or hurtful and then that has taken you to a very difficult place. Robert Holden has written that *life is actually bad for your health, or at least that's how it feels sometimes. When we are in a good space life is great, everything is great, we acknowledge life to be a blessing full of beauty, awe and wonder. We value life and we do everything we can to experience it to its fullest; but we also have moments when we probably wouldn't recommend life to anyone under any circumstances. Life can feel deadly.* As a Pastor over the years I've experienced that with people most around relationship breakups; the sudden ending or breaking up of a relationship can be one of the most difficult things people can handle. They can handle other things easier, but the place of pain around a relationship break-up can be one of the most difficult; and in the midst of it, for many people, life can indeed seem deadly. No way out and no way back to happiness. Robert Holden, in his book, said, *unless we are happy with ourselves we will not be happy over all.* He calls this his 'Happiness principle'. Now, it's very similar to the gospel reading this morning in which Jesus said there are two commandments: love God with all of your heart, mind and soul and strength, and the second is likewise unto the first: you shall love your neighbour as you love yourself. Jesus almost takes for granted that people love themselves. Jesus almost seems to take for granted that we begin with self-worth. Now I don't know if he'd been teaching his disciples about that and he felt maybe they got it and he'd just taken it for granted, but we cannot love others until we get to that place of loving ourselves. It's from that place of loving ourselves that we then move out into loving others in the world. This is his happiness principle. So he takes a look at some of the external ways we try to find happiness: first, in what we do. Holden says that unless we love ourselves, unless we are happy with ourselves, we will not be happy with what we do. No amount of doing or achieving will guarantee happiness. He also says that sometimes we try to get happiness from where we are and he says unless we are happy with ourselves we are unlikely to be happy with wherever we are. You know, often times we just move to a new apartment or a new city and then think it will be okay. In AA they call it the geographical cure when people try to think that a new location will bring about happiness; or who we're with. Sometimes we think that's where happiness comes from and again, unless we are happy with ourselves we are unlikely to be happy with whomever we're with; or what we have, what we possess. Unless we are happy with ourselves we are not likely to be happy with what we have; that we will look for happiness in what we accumulate. True joy does not come about through changing a wardrobe. It comes about through changing our minds. So there are many things that can be positive influencers and many things that can be negative influencers in our lives but they do not have to determine the state of our own happiness. Think about it like the wind blowing against a large tree. Yes, that wind can cause the tree to waver a little a bit and the leaves on the tree to move but if the roots of the tree are strong that tree will be able to withstand the wind as it comes. I started out with some examples of some small things that can be influencers but there are also very big things: the death of someone close to us can be devastating. We don't have to be "Pollyanna" in terms of it's okay. Death hurts and it really hurts to lose someone close to us; and what Holden talks about in his book and what our faith says to us is that we can hold these two things together; we can hold a deep sadness and a deep pain over losing someone; and we can hold that together with a celebration of their life and how wonderful they were in our lives, how



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good it was to have those memories together that we have. To be able to live with the loss and the pain yet not letting it overcome us; to live with the loss while we celebrate the gift. There is the tragedy of illness in our lives, disease in our lives and how difficult it is, particularly when it is someone close to us is going through a life-threatening or life-ending illness and in some cases pain and horrible, horrible ways to die. We can be there in the midst of that pain and that sadness and that difficulty while at the same time celebrating the gift of life for them and for us and not letting the tragedy of the illness overcome the goodness of life and our faith and our hope that we can get through it. And even for those of you this morning – and there are a number of you this morning who've shared that you are in the midst of a life-threatening illness yourself – and facing that illness while being able at the same time to hold on to your faith that things will be okay, that death is not an ending but a transition. Death interrupts the conversation and the journey but it does not end the relationship. It does not end the spiritual journey that we're on.

Last night I went to the twentieth anniversary of Casey House, and thank you, Pearce, for pulling all that together, that event. It was an amazing event and it began with folks saying they'd hoped the event would never come. The hope was that long ago we'd have found a cure and Casey House would no longer have to be a place caring for people in the midst of life-threatening illnesses and could have been transformed into something different. Last night was also a tribute to June Callwood, one of the founders of Casey House. There was a clip of June speaking at one of her last interviews and she was talking about that first week at Casey House when it first opened and for the first couple of days there were no clients, because it was a house of death. She talked about how, when that first client arrived, an ambulance pulled up and the ambulance drivers – for fear of this disease and the fear that they might catch it – were covered in masks and things on their shoes and everything – fearing that they might catch this and the ambulance people put the stretcher down in the hall, and June describes this perky receptionist who was on duty who got up and walked around the desk and went to this person in front of the ambulance drivers and reached down and kissed the person on the cheek and took his hand and said to him, "You're going to love being here. This is a good place." How, in the midst of AIDS today and the way that person was treated by the ambulance drivers, and it's different today here, but it's the way the same people are being treated in other parts of the world still, around the stigma. How can we rejoice always when we have medications here that are extending life, that are preventing mother to child transmission when other parts of the world do not have access to these medications and twenty-eight million in Africa are suffering! How can we live with that and rejoice always I say rejoice. We live with it because we can hold both; we can hold the tragedy and our anger while also holding our faith and our hope and looking at the amazing struggles and journeys of grandmothers and others in Africa and look at the amazing work being done by people for justice around the world; and we can find hope and good news in the midst of those examples of courage, where one does not overcome us.

This week is International Women's Day, another year will have passed. Will we have made progress in our own country in terms of equality and in other countries in the world? or will there remain in law and in practice discrimination that we would find intolerable. How can we hold the reality of injustice and inequality with the concept of happiness and rejoicing and celebration. We can hold both of them and one does not overcome the other. We can hold both of them together because again we see examples of courage and strength and places where change is happening. This week I went also to a panel discussion on the Caribbean and the issues in some countries, Jamaica and other countries, around what life is like and the horror of life for GLBT people in some of those countries. How do we hold that – discrimination and death – with rejoicing? How do we hold that? Our church in Jamaica cannot even advertise its address. We have to move around and share quietly where the meetings are at. We hold that with the call to rejoice because we see the courage of people who stand up for justice and to work for a better world.



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In October I will go to Poland for a conference on Eastern Europe MCCs and I've requested some time on the agenda while I'm there to be able to go to a concentration camp. How do we hold the horror of the Holocaust with a call to rejoice? We do so because we see examples of courage, forgiveness, reconciliation for people who work for peace so never again, never again. There will be disasters, there will be tragedies; there will be things that will influence us and yet it does not need to overcome the hope, the faith, the love, the peace and even the joy within us. Holden says that when we are unhappy that we need to stick to our greatest strengths. In fact, he says that if we are unhappy, if unhappiness has overcome us, that it may be because we've abandoned the greatest sources of our strength and he uses the example of Peter who abandoned Jesus in the midst of the difficult times; that Peter who received the strength and hope through the teachings of the life of Jesus abandoned Jesus three times and abandoned his greatest source of strength. What are those sources of strength for you? Being aware what those sources of strength are and being able to hold on to those sources of strength and not abandoning them in the midst of the difficult times. God in you and God through you for our world. Love in you and love through you for our world. Peace in you and peace through you for our world. Joy in you and joy through you for our world. We have to embrace infinity inside a mortal body. We have to believe in a God we cannot see. We have to learn to love in a dimension when there is so much hatred. We have to see abundance when people constantly talk of lack. We have to discover freedom where there is control. We have to develop self-worth where there is criticism. We have to discover beauty where there is ugliness. We have to embrace kindness when surrounded by uncertainty. Whether it's a hurting comment or a disaster or a death or an illness, now abide faith and hope and love and the greatest of these is love.

Amen.