

What is True Happiness?

Romans 12:2g

Sermon Transcript by Rev. Ernest O'Neill

During the weeks before Easter we have been discussing the pressures that most of us experience from just the environment in which we live. Some of them are dead obvious -- the pressures that come from the tightness in the economy--the kind of pressure that either brings about a loss of our jobs or simply brings the kind of tightness in our financial situation that forces us to live in ways that we don't really want to live ourselves. So there are pressures like that that are obvious pressures.

Then there are pressures not so obvious that come from the environment or the society in which we live. Pressures such as obviously John Hinckley experienced, who shot President Reagan. The kind of pressures that all of us experienced when we were his age probably. The pressures that come from having to be on the football team in order to get attention or the pressures that come from trying to live up to certain ideals that will make us respected and acknowledged by our peers. Most of those pressures you feel, well they are what Shakespeare said they were -- "the thousand natural shocks that flesh is heir to", and most of us tend to dismiss them like that. "Yes, that's what they are, that is what living in society is about; it brings pressure."

Yet don't you agree that when you see a fellow like John Hinckley, so overwhelmed by his mania to get the attention of the young film star that he would even shoot the President of the United States, when you see that happening you begin to think "wait a minute, there is more in these pressures than meets the eye. There is something sinister back there that can make a guy do something as ridiculous as that."

You remember that's what we began to realize. We begin to realize that there does seem to be something behind these pressures that is deeper than just their apparent effect. Probably most of us here would agree that, "Yes, the little pressures that we experience from our friends and from our colleagues have tended to make us a bundle of learned responses." Many of us I think would admit that we do at times have trouble finding out if there is anything real inside us at all. Sometimes we wonder is there anybody in there? We feel like knocking and saying, "Who's there?", because we feel very empty at times. We feel almost as if that is what we are, a bundle of learned responses. The boss smiles, we smile; the boss frowns, we frown; it is a sunny day, we are happy; it is a rainy day; we are sad. Often we feel that. We smile at the boss because we want his favor; we frown at the subordinate because we want to reinforce our authority; we smile at this girl because we want her to like us; we frown at this guy because we don't care about him. And so it goes on like that until I think many of us feel, "Yes, they are having their affect on us, those pressures. We are tending more and more to become empty inside."

We wonder at times who are we. We search inside to see if there is any independent source of initiative and direction inside our hearts that comes from us being an individual, apart from us just being a little performing dog that begs when the master offers us a treat. We begin to realize that the pressures are having their effects on us, and we wonder at times if there is any "me" at all inside. And indeed you know that that is one of the current problems that we face so often in schools and colleges; so many of us have an identity problem, an identity crisis. We hardly know who we are, because we have almost ceased to be anybody at all. We feel we have become a little robot

that responds to the pressures.

Now, why do these pressures get their hooks into us like that? Do you know? Why we are so overwhelmed by what the boss wants us to do, by what our school wants us to do, by what our government wants us to do, by what our peers want us to do, by what our friends want us to do, that we almost seem to have lost the possibility of initiating things ourselves? Why? Why have we come so under the pressures of society?

Loved ones, I think it is because we hope we'll get from society what we need. That's it. We hope we'll get from society what we need, and that is why we come under its pressures. And we want to please it because we think it'll give us the things that we need. But why, why when we see that are we not able to simply stop? Why could John Hinckley not see that he was fantasizing to the point of the edge of insanity, and simply stop fantasizing? Why can we not stop living under the pressure of smiling at this person and frowning at that person, of pleasing this person and displeasing that person? Why can we simply not stop?

You remember what we discovered in Romans 12:2. "Do not be conformed." That is what all these pressures do; they try to conform us. We conform to what this one wants us to do, we conform to what this group wants us to do, and we conform to what this person thinks we should do. "Do not be conformed to society?" No. "Do not be conformed to this world." You remember what we shared some weeks ago, that the Greek word for world is "cosmos", and it doesn't just mean the physical world around us, but it means a whole ordered system and organization of spiritual forces that are ruled by what Jesus calls "the rulers of this present darkness."

In other words, there are powers, spirit powers. Some of them are what people contact when they deal in the occult. There are spirit powers behind these pressures, these conforming pressures in our society. They are all the time impinging on our spirits every time we yield to one of these pressures, and as they impinge they get more and more control of us, and that is why we are unable to get free of them. So when you look for love, you can look either to the God who made you or you can look to the world system. When you look for a sense of personal value, you can look to the God who made you or you can look to the world system. If you look to the God who made you, he frees you, maintains your free will and enables you to become a fulfillment of himself and freedom. If you look to the world system, it gets its hooks into your personality, it destroys your free will, it crushes your individuality and eventually makes you wither and shrink until you die inside.

How do you get free? How do you get free of the world system? There's only one way to get free of this crushing atmosphere -- the same way the astronauts did. You get into something far more powerful than yourself and then you lift off. What we have said is that the vehicle that will lift us free of this atmosphere is Jesus. In him each one of us were crucified to the world and the world was crucified to us. We have said so often that Jesus' death on Calvary, the whole point of it was to free us inside from these invisible spirit powers that chain us to this world. The outward, physical death on Calvary was only an expression in history of the cosmic death that all of us experienced in eternity when God freed us from these world powers and forces.

Now how do you experience that in your own life? How do you experience the effects of that freeing death in your own life? Well you remember the verse says it, "Do not be conformed to this world, but be transformed" and then you remember you have the phrase "be transformed by the renewal of your mind." By beginning to renew your mind, beginning to think the way Jesus thinks; identifying yourself with the space shuttle that will carry you free. Identifying yourselves with Jesus,

presenting your life to God as he did and beginning to think the way he thought.

What I'd like to share just briefly this morning is one area, where if we would renew our minds, we would experience the freeing, lifting deliverance of Jesus' resurrection. And really it's very close to every one of us. It is the renewal of the mind that is needed in regard to a phrase that Jefferson used in the Declaration of Independence. He said, "The preservation of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness." There is no pursuit engaged in today so consistently, and so persistently and so universally as the pursuit of happiness. Because of that, there is no pursuit that exerts such overwhelming pressure upon us to conform as this pursuit of happiness.

Loved ones, you and I come under that pressure to conform because of a misinterpretation of what Jefferson meant by the "pursuit of happiness." When Jefferson talked about the pursuit of happiness, he held the normal definition of happiness. That is it was normal until our miserable generation was born. And it is the belief that happiness is a result of a whole series of actions or a way of life. When Jefferson said "life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness," he was saying, "Look, I'm summarizing the kind of life that all of you know you are to live in order to have happiness by saying 'and the pursuit of happiness.'" But we dumb-dumbs we don't believe that at all. We say, "Happiness! Pursue it! Right! We'll pursue happiness. It is a God-given right of all red-blooded Americans to pursue happiness. I am going to give my life to pursuing happiness." And we do! We don't realize that you can't pursue happiness. It is like pursuing humility. "I want you to know I'm pursuing humility here this morning. I'm very modest about my humility, but I pursue it day after day." You don't! You miss it! If you pursue humility, you miss humility; if you pursue happiness, you miss happiness. Jefferson knew that, he knew that you can't pursue happiness. You can only live a life that may or may not bring happiness. But you can't pursue happiness itself.

Loved ones, that is the truth. We need to renew our minds in regard to our attitude to happiness. You don't get happiness by pursuing it; you get happiness by living a certain kind of life where the potentialities of your personality are fulfilled. Then happiness is the incidental by-product of that. It's an incidental result of a certain kind of life. But you don't pursue happiness and make that the whole purpose of your life. If you do you will find that at the end you have become simply a dissipated dissolute who has nothing left of health, either mentally or emotionally.

If we as a nation, loved ones, do it -- if we as a nation pursue happiness above everything else, we will do what you remember that conservative said we would do, "we'll end up selling communism the rope which they will use to hang us." And if you pursue happiness in your own life above everything else, that will be the result in your own life. We need to renew our minds in regard to that about happiness. Happiness brings destruction if you pursue it and make its pursuit the chief goal of your life.

The second way in which we need to renew our minds about happiness is to consider, who is the happiest human being in the whole world? In fact let's extend it to the universe. Who's the happiest person in the whole universe? It is our Creator's dear son Jesus. Now, happiness is not pleasant things happening to you. It is not. That is why I point you to Jesus. We never think of Jesus as a man to whom pleasant things happened. Happiness loved ones is not pleasant things happening to you. God's word puts it bluntly opposite to that if you look at it in James 1:2.

"Count it all joy, my brethren, when you have 10 gallons of Coke a day, five gallons of chocolate chip ice cream and the sun shines continually?" No. "Count it all joy, my brethren, when you meet various trials." We need to waken up, because we all think, "Yeah, yeah it is a very holy thing to

say and James could well say it then. But let's face it, trials are a miserable, unpleasant experience that you should avoid at all costs." But don't you see it? God is completely the other way. He says to count it all joy -- when? "When you enter into various trials." Certainly God does not think that happiness is favorable things happening to you. In fact, do you see further down, in verse 12 the Greek word is "makarios", and it means "happy". "Happy is the man who endures trial." "Hupomeno" is the verb in Greek and "hupo" is "under" and "meno" is "remain" --remain under. It means happy is the man who remains under a trial, who allows it to do its full work in him, not who's depressed by it or beaten down by it, but who remains in that situation, in that tight spot, as long as it is necessary, because there is something happening inside in his heart. That is the person who is happy. It is not circumstances that make us happy. It isn't.

Brothers and sisters, we are all in the same boat; we all think the same way. Samuel Johnson, in the 18th century, said, "Man always thinks that if he could only change his circumstances he would be happy." Loved ones, happiness is not pleasant things happening to you; it is not favorable things happening to you. So would you stop scanning the horizon with your binoculars, "Ah I see a happy event coming up, yippee!" Stop! But that's us, isn't it? Isn't it? We'll endure anything because we hope there is a good time coming. Because we think that the good time coming is happy things happening to us, favorable things happening to us. Of course it is a hideous situation, because the world is sinful and there are usually more bad things happening than good things in a sinful world. Many of us live our lives in absolute and continual frustration, always scanning the horizon for some happy event and we live for that happy event.

The tragedy is, while we are waiting we live half-lives. That's the tragedy. We live half lives because we are always waiting for the happy event, and while we are waiting, we hardly bother with the loved ones that we meet day by day. Stop scanning the horizon for a happy event; stop enslaving your life to a set of circumstances that have come to be regarded by our society as happy circumstances.

I'll say that again, because you will be shocked when I describe the circumstances. Stop spending your life looking and waiting and watching, trying to bring about sets of circumstances that are regarded by our society as happy circumstances. A good husband, who works preferably at 3M or IBM; a two-car garage and a rambler, it'd be great in Edina, but even Bloomington is ok; two preferably blond-haired little children, a boy and a girl; and three weeks vacation every year would be nice but even two weeks vacation every year. It is terrible! But I know as you and I laugh and think of that, we guys we do it the other way. A girl, the girl with an hour-glass figure, and the cheerleader, and all the rest of it. She must be bright, happy and intelligent as well, and talented, and all the rest of it, and able to look after the home, make us happy, take care of the children and do a thousand other things that no ordinary human being could do. But isn't it true that we all here are silly? We are becoming enslaved; we will do anything to bring that dream about won't we? We'll do anything to bring that dream about. We'll endure anything to make sure that that happens, we will, you know we will. Both guys and girls here this morning you know that, we will enslave ourselves for life, we will be dishonest, we will bluff, we will take somebody that we aren't really in love with. We will do anything in order to bring about what society regards as a happy set of circumstances.

Loved ones, it is deception and lies. Many who are in those circumstances will now, with pain in their hearts, tell you it was lies. Happiness does not consist of favorable things happening to you or favorable circumstances occurring. It doesn't! It doesn't, loved ones, but do you see that that is what brings us into conformity? Isn't it? Isn't it? That's what brings us into conformity. That

is what takes the individuality out of us and makes us jump through any hoops that any subordinate or any authority over us desires us to jump through. We'll do anything in order to bring about that favorable set of circumstances.

Do you know you could die in a dirty hole in the ground with nobody knowing you and everybody despising you and be disgustingly happy? Do you know that, that there are men and women who have done it? There are men and women who have lived out their lives in hovels, have died in holes in the ground with nobody knowing they ever died, and there is such a happiness rising in their hearts that they don't notice the hovel, and they don't notice the damp and cold. Please don't come under that deception; it is deception and lies. Happiness is not outward in things happening to you. Happiness is in here inside.

You know many of us in our society and this is the last thing I would ask you to think of, that we need to renew our minds in regard to the current heresy. Many of us in our society accept all that. We still hanker after that silliness but we really do believe that in this highly unstable world there is little possibility of favorable circumstances remaining for any long period of time. So we, our generation, have drifted into a new heresy--happiness is a fleeting feeling of either peace or exhilaration. We live for that moment, either in sexual experience or we live for that moment through drugs or we live for that moment through the occult, and would you believe it, there are hundreds of us who live for that moment in religion.

Loved ones, we are in a dangerous position, we in this society, because it is a common belief that runs through the whole society and is behind every television commercial that you see. There is a common belief that happiness is that rare moment of peace or magnificent exhilaration that you can experience either through sex, through drugs, or through the occult or through religion. So we have thousands of so-called Christians who do not live lives of principle at all. They live lives of feeling. They live lives of feeling looking forward to the next exciting prayer meeting or the next exciting service. But there is little principle in their lives. Happiness is not a fleeting feeling of exhilaration or peace. You can be happy without those feelings at all. Those feelings are moonbeams. Stop trying to catch moonbeams. Those are effervescent, they're temporary, and they disappear in a moment. They aren't worth a moment's pursuit.

What is happiness? Happiness is being. It is being a certain kind of person. Happiness is character; it is being a certain kind of person. Your dear God put you here for a certain purpose. You don't do what I do, but you can do something that I can't do. More important than that you do something that you've been put here to do, whether a half-dozen other people can do it or not, you have been put here to do something by your Maker. That's why he put you here. Do that. Begin to do that for him with your whole heart. That is finally what happiness is. Happiness is being -- being what your Maker made you to be. That is the whole meaning of those Beatitudes. We call them "beautiful attitudes." And it is the same with that word blessed. The Greek word again is "makarios". It isn't actually "Blessed are the poor in spirit;" it is "Happy are the poor in spirit." You get the paradox if you look at the one where Jesus said, "Happy are those who mourn, and happy are the meek, and happy are those who are persecuted for righteousness' sake." Happiness is being what your Creator made you to be, whether the feelings are good, whether the circumstances are bad, whatever. It is being what God has made you to be. Loved ones, that's what it is.

I do think you should think again about who you are and why you are here. I tell you I think many of us have far too blown-up and high an opinion of ourselves, but I think many of us have too low an opinion of ourselves in this way. We think, "Me? Oh, no! I can see how God put Billy Graham here for

a purpose, I can see how God put Reagan here for a purpose, no, I am just one of the crowd." That is Satan's deception to get you into this silly, futile business of pursuing feelings or pursuing good circumstances. You are put here to do something that God has planned for you to do. Find out what Jesus is trying to do through your life for this world. That's it! Find that out! Maybe it is scrubbing floors. If it is scrubbing floors there will be a happiness, a peace, a contentment, a sense of integration throughout your life that you could not describe. Maybe it is working on computers. Maybe it is putting in nails into the same kind of wood year after year after year.

The interesting thing is -- G. K. Chesterton is right, we don't actually need variety. Human beings love doing the same thing. That is why he says that when a baby is delighted, it bangs its feet up and down on the ground. You loved doing the same thing again when you are happy. And really the issue is not actually boredom; the issue is whether you are doing what God made you to do or not. If you are doing that, you can do it for a thousand years, and inside you will have a joy that remains whatever circumstances are like and whatever feelings are like. That is the key. Really it is. Each one of us here is put here to be happy. There is only one way to be happy, and that is to ascertain what your dear Maker put you here to do, and then let his Son do that through you, because that is the only way you will ever achieve it. Any other way you will draw a lot of attention to yourself; you will make a lot of noise, but you won't change the world. But if you let his Son inside you, he will do your job in a way that only he can, and you will be able to enjoy the ride, which is nice. Let us pray.

Dear Lord, we would just pray for each other. Pray for each other in this room, especially for any little one who is anything but happy or for anyone who is just wearing themselves out trying to get the right feelings through religion or through some other means. We pray for any little one here who is praying for the moment when everything turns out right, when all the circumstances will fall about right and everything will fall into place. Lord we pray for that little one who is living in continual frustration and is condemned at the moment to everlasting frustration. Lord we pray for any of us here who are trying to catch the moonbeams of feelings or trying to bring about that impossible set up of perfect circumstances. Lord we will begin to forget this business of whether we are happy or not. We would begin to forget living for this continual happiness and we would set about the purpose for which you have put us here on earth. So Lord Jesus we would ask you by your Spirit to show us each one this morning what we are here on this earth to do and then Lord we would put our hands in yours and do that with all our hearts. Not for ourselves or for the world but for you and for your father and we ask you Lord Jesus to come in to our lives and lift us above these mirages of happiness and bring us into complete fulfillment.