

Finding Wisdom, September 22, 2024, St. Timothy, Burnaby
Proverbs 31.10-31; Psalm 1; James 3.13-4.3, 7-8a; Mark 9.30-37

“Submit yourselves therefore to God. Draw near to God, and [God] will draw near to you.”

Prayer

“Happy are they who trust in God.”

“Happy” is one of those words that I am always suspicious of. Especially in the Bible. And it’s not because I’m so up-to-date on my translations and interpretations that I’m suspicious whether or not a writer has translated the word correctly. My suspicion is more about what the word “happy” *means*. When happiness is promised as the outcome of some behaviour or action, I get especially suspicious. After all, it’s always possible to just re-define “happiness” to fit the bill of whatever the outcome already is. “Happiness” is not some well-established and measurable criterion that can be easily measured and assessed. Not only are there degrees of happiness (which I think we can all agree on), but there are also very different paths *toward* happiness, depending on the person involved. And, what works for one person in achieving happiness, may not work for another as their needs are different, as is their expectation for what “happiness” looks like.

So, when someone, even a scripture writer supposedly speaking on behalf of God, promises happiness as the outcome for *all* readers if only they follow a particular path, I am skeptical. How could that be? How could one act done by all the different people in the world in all their different situations lead them to a place of happiness, since that will look different for each person?

For “the wife of noble character” (as the subject of Proverbs 31 is often called), the laundry list of expectations is enormous. Taking care of family and servants, making clothes, running a business, organizing the staff, and always speaking with wisdom in a kind manner. No wonder it is hard to find her and she is worth more than her weight in jewels. But, for the woman who achieves this challenging (if not impossible) list, the reward is spelled out for her: “[h]er children rise up and call her happy; her husband too, and he praises her.” In the time that the book of Proverbs was being compiled, that was the path for women to be “happy”—a nearly impossible set of requirements. The elusive “happiness” will likely remain just out-of-reach, even for those pursuing all the characteristics of the Proverbs 31 ideal woman.

Or will it?

The psalm we looked at this morning also has a promise regarding happiness. It promises that those who “trust in God” will be happy. Although this is another blanket promise for huge groups of readers with their own requirements and paths to happiness, it seems to ring truer, somehow. It suggests that the very action of trusting in God leads to happiness, though not always as a direct result. Happiness could be the consequence of trusting in God—but it could also be the prerequisite. It might not be that obedience and trust leads to happiness, but rather that happiness makes one more inclined to trust in God. Perhaps it is a “chicken or egg” situation (especially if we’re thinking about the Biblical character Job).

And when we look at the two New Testament readings this morning, we see the outcome of a failure to trust in God in the pursuit of happiness. First, the epistle of James talks about the “conflicts and disputes

among” the believers, saying that they originate from their own “cravings that are at war within” them. Because they are seeking after their own cravings, in order to satisfy their own desires rather than seeking to act wisely, their pursuit of happiness will ultimately fail. James encourages them to be wise, and to pursue God—that ultimately will lead to their happiness (though it’s not a promise he makes). James’ promise comes at the end of the passage we looked at: “Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.” This blanket statement, applying to all James’ readers, doesn’t promise happiness, but does promise a response from God to those who draw near to God.

In the gospel reading, the followers of Jesus are afraid to ask him to explain himself. Jesus has been talking about his upcoming trial and death and subsequent resurrection. But his disciples don’t understand and are too afraid to ask him to clarify. So they default to their posture—they argue amongst themselves who is the greatest. This, too, is a failure to trust in God in their pursuit of happiness in their lives. Like the audience James is addressing in his letter, Jesus’ disciples mistakenly think that they can achieve their objectives (happiness, meaning, status) through selfish ambition. James warns his audience about “bitter envy and selfish ambition in [their] hearts,” and further warns them not to be “boastful and false to the truth.” Jesus’ disciples exhibit a similar lack of humility. And that is why Jesus gives them the example he does—the little child placed before them.

“Whoever wants to be first,” Jesus tells his ambitious disciples, “must be last of all and servant of all.” He knows what they have been discussing. The one among them who is to be the greatest is *not* the strongest or biggest or smartest or most charming. Rather, it is the one who can demonstrate *humility* the most fully, serving *all* others, even a child. The child represents someone in that society who has nothing to give. They are dependent on others for everything and offer nothing in return. Children, in Jesus’ world, are the least important members of society. But, Jesus tells his disciples, if you can welcome someone like this, someone powerless and helpless and unable to advance your cause, then you will also be welcoming me, as well as my father who sent me.

Humble yourselves; draw near to God, and God will draw near to you. If you are seeking happiness, or position, or acclaim, you will find it *not* in puffing yourself up, but in humbling yourself. The one who is truly *wise*, as the readings began, is the one who seeks after God and God’s ideals.

We may have missed the parallels between the “woman of noble character” in today’s reading, with Lady Wisdom in last week’s reading from the first chapter of Proverbs. In that reading, if you’ll recall, Wisdom is calling out on the streets for people to take heed of her words. To live wisely. And to follow the word of God. The outcomes Wisdom promises to those who *do* seek after wisdom, are very closely aligned with the benefits that follow the woman of noble character’s actions in today’s reading. The strong suggestion, then, is that the woman of noble character is an example for both men *and* women, of what it might look like, in practice, to seek wisdom. What our lives might become. It is a lofty goal, certainly, but it is not unachievable. But the core of wisdom, as we are learning, is seeking after God. It is in that *seeking* that we truly find happiness—like those who trust in God and don’t follow the advice of the wicked. Those who seek to live out their pursuits of God in all the actions of their lives at home and in the marketplace. Those who ask for good gifts from God, not motivated by selfish ambition. And those who are able to humble themselves to the point of welcoming into their presence even those who bring nothing of value to their lives.

Following God's word is wisdom. Living those truths in our lives is what wisdom looks like in practice. And those who have the wisdom to trust in God will draw near to God—and God will draw near to them.

Happy are the ones who trust in God. Amen.