

EASTER 7B – May 13th 2018
The Key to a Happy Life
(Psalm 1)

First of all, “Happy Mother’s Day.” I hope that all the moms here this morning have a truly wonderful day today with their families.

Now we all know, of course, that moms are special people; no doubt about it. A mom was once out walking with her 4-year-old daughter when the little girl reached down and picked something up from the ground and started to put it into her mouth. Naturally, the mom immediately took it away from her and told her she shouldn’t do that. “Why?” asked the little girl. “Because it’s been lying outside, you don’t know where it’s been, it’s filthy dirty, and it probably has germs.”

At this point, her daughter looked up at her with a look of total admiration and asked, “How do you know all this stuff?” Without thinking, the mom said, “All moms know this stuff. It’s on the mommy test. You *have* to know it, or they won’t let you *be* a mommy.”

Well they continued to walk on for several more minutes while the little girl pondered this new information. Finally, she looked up at her mom. “Oh, I get it now,” she beamed. “So, if you *don’t* pass the mommy test, then you have to be a daddy, right?” The mother just smiled and said, “Exactly!”

But moms are not only really smart, they’re also fierce too, aren’t they? In other words, you don’t want to tangle with them... ever. In fact, a police recruit was once asked during his interview, “What would you do if you had to arrest your own mother?” Without blinking an eye, he answered. “I’d call for backup,”

So what *should* you do for your mom on Mother’s Day? A rather energetic and rambunctious 8-year-old once gave a card to his mother

with two little pills inside the envelope. The homemade card read: “Dear Mother, here are two aspirins. Have a Happy Mother’s Day!”

Then there’s the six and four year old siblings – a brother and a sister – who presented *their* mother with a small spindly house plant. While it wasn’t the finest looking specimen, they had bought it with their own money, and so mom was thrilled. She hugged and kissed them, and told them how much she loved them for thinking of her.

In response, 6-year-old Johnny said, “There were some other flowers we *wanted* to buy for you mom, but we didn’t have enough money.” “Yeah,” said sister Suzy, “they had a real nice bunch of flowers at the shop that we were *going* to buy.”

“But I love this plant,” said the happy mother.

“I know, Mom,” said Johnny,” but these flowers would have been perfect for you. They were shaped in a wreath, and they had a ribbon on them that said, “Rest in Peace.” At which point, little Suzy chimed in, “Yeah, they would have been perfect because you’re always asking us for a little peace so that you can get some rest.”

On Mother’s Day, of course, we all want to know what will make our moms happy. And then we try to do something to bring that about..

But there’s an even larger question here as well, isn’t there? Simply, “What *is* happiness? Even more specific, “What is the *key* to happiness?” And for everyone; not just mothers.

Interestingly enough, on the day when we wish all our moms “Happy Mother’s Day,” the word “happy,” itself, is the very first word in the psalm assigned for today; the psalm which is also the very first psalm in the entire Bible: Psalm 1.

You see, some things never change, apparently. As J. Clinton McCann,

Professor of Biblical Interpretation at Eden Seminary in St. Louis, Missouri points out: “Some 2,500 years or so *after* the origin of Psalm 1, we are *still* thinking and talking about happiness.” And he’s exactly right, of course.

Professor McCann then goes on to point out that, in recent years, there has even emerged an academic discipline within the social sciences actually called “happiness studies”! There is even now a *Journal of Happiness Studies* which refers to itself as *An Interdisciplinary Forum on Subjective Well-Being*.

File that word “subjective” away for just a moment, because we’ll come back to it shortly. And also because it says a lot about how we view and understand “happiness.”

Apparently happiness has been on our minds and has been the focus of our thoughts for a very long time. As Americans, of course, this notion of happiness is even in our DNA, so to speak. For instance, what does our Declaration of Independence say? “We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable rights, that among these are... Life... Liberty... and the pursuit *of*... Happiness, right?

But, again, what *is* happiness? Or, perhaps, the question is: What *makes* us happy?

There was a time when happiness was defined as “a chicken in every pot and a car in every garage.” I remember hearing that slogan as a boy, but I didn’t know where it came from. So I looked it up. It was actually the campaign promise of Herbert Hoover in the 1928 presidential election. Hoover won, of course. But then, in 1929, came the stock market crash that plunged the country into the Great Depression and just putting food on the table – *any* kind of food – suddenly became a huge challenge for millions of Americans. And for many of them, owning their own car was now nothing more than a pipe dream.

Today, of course, we define happiness in other ways. Most of us have enough food, and many of us eat far more than we should! (Yours truly included.) And single-car households almost don't even exist anymore. Most households today have multiple vehicles. Which means that, currently, there are many *other things* that we feel we need in order to experience happiness.

And so here's where we come back to that word "subjective" as in "*subjective* well-being." The word "subjective," of course, refers to the way in which a person experiences things *in his or her own mind*. In other words, it's based on our "feelings" or "opinions," and not necessarily on the "facts," or "reality."

And so how *do we* normally define "happiness"? Professor McCann tells us that happiness scholars "are interested in what people *think and feel* about various aspects of their lives – income level, relationships, health, career, and so on."

But there's another part here as well. The concept of happiness goes even further back... into our childhoods, as a matter of fact. As children I'm sure we all read, or had read *to us*, all the great fairy tales. (Or, if you're like *my kids*, you watched them on Disney videos!)

Cinderella, Sleeping Beauty, Snow White. What did they all have in common? The last sentence was always: "and they lived... *happily*... ever after." In other words, we've been conditioned since our childhoods to desire, if not *expect*, that we too will live "happily ever after."

But is that realistic? Is that even possible for all of us?

Because *this kind* of happiness, of course, depends primarily, if not exclusively on everything going right or perfectly in our lives, doesn't it? The definition of "happy" in the dictionary, for example, reads as follows: "favored by luck or good fortune." The dictionary goes on to

say that “happy” is “feeling pleasure and enjoyment because of your life or situation.”

If we think of happiness only in *these* terms, then what? Well, it means that we’ll only be happy, therefore, when our lives go exactly the way we *want* or *expect* them to. So, as long as our health is good, we have a good job that we enjoy and that pays us well, and we have all the creature comforts we desire, then we – *anybody*, for that matter – can be happy.

The story is told about a young engineer, just out of MIT, going on his first job interview. Reaching the end of the interview, the human resources person, asked the young engineer what kind of salary he was expecting. The young man replied, “Oh... in the neighborhood of \$140,000 a year to start, depending on the benefits package, of course.”

The HR person looked back at him, smiled, and said, “Oh really? Well, how about this: 5 weeks vacation to start, 14 paid holidays, full medical and dental, a company matching retirement fund at 100% of salary, and a new company-leased car every two years... say, a red Corvette?”

“Wow!” said the young engineer. “Are you kidding me?”

“Yeah... of course I’m just kidding,” said the HR person. But *you* started it!”

However, as Jeff Strite notes, what happens “when life goes south; when friends desert you; when your finances are in the tank; when your health is failing; or when your dreams are dashed”? What then?

Of course, to be sure, there *is* much joy and happiness in life! Make no mistake about it.

It’s just that in life it’s not *all* joy and happiness... at least as we normally define those terms. And it’s not all joy and happiness *all*

the time, either. Because there are also tough times; trying times; challenging times. For each and every one of us.

So an understanding of happiness based exclusively on good luck or good fortune is going to fail us when the going gets tough, isn't it? An understanding of happiness based exclusively on things going exactly as we planned or expected them to is going to leave us disappointed and disillusioned, won't it?

But, thankfully, there's an alternative; a completely different way of thinking about and defining happiness. And that alternative is found in today's reading, and in that very first psalm of the entire Bible. In fact, it was probably intentionally placed there precisely *because* it offers us an alternative understanding of happiness, then as well as now.

Because in this psalm – and all the others to follow, as a matter of fact – the primary focus is not *us* – in other words, our wants, our desires, and our expectations – but rather on *God!* As Professor McCann, again, writes, “In short, and in contrast to much of what our society tells us, happiness is not about doing what *we* want to do. Rather, happiness,” he says, “is about doing what *God* wants done.”

Happiness, says Psalm 1, is experienced not by those for whom everything in life goes right or perfectly. Instead, happiness is experienced, we hear, by those whose “delight is in the law of the Lord.” On this law, God's law, we are told, they meditate day and night.

Now we have to stop there for just a second. Because something about that doesn't sound quite right at first, especially to us as Lutherans. Delighting *in* and meditating *on* the law sounds suspiciously like some kind of works righteousness, doesn't it? Especially when we read, a few verses later, that the Lord “watches over the way of the righteous.”

What I mean here is that we often have this concept or picture of the law as a long list of rules and regulations – do’s and don’ts – for us to follow. And if we follow them perfectly, and to the letter – this reasoning goes – then and *only* then, will we experience happiness. Happiness, in *this* scenario at least, is a kind of reward for perfectly following the law. And in a sense, therefore, it’s earned.

But the usual translation of the Hebrew word, *torah* (tor-rah’), with the English word “law” is a little misleading, scholars tell us. It is perhaps *better* understood as “teaching” or “instruction,” they say. And in the broadest sense, what *torah really* suggests is God’s will; God’s will for our lives. God’s will for our lives that, in fact, will bring us *true* happiness.

Happiness, then, is all about, as someone once put it, “a life that takes real pleasure in living according to God’s will.” In other words, God’s will for our lives is what really brings us pleasure and happiness, not our own selfish needs and desires.

Therefore, Psalm 1 does not suggest that happiness can be reduced to a mechanical process of following a set of rules, for which we are then rewarded, as I suggested just a moment ago. Instead, happiness is experienced when we meditate on God’s *will*, in order to discern what God would have us do in each and every situation in our lives.

Or to put it quite simply: Happiness is when God is at the *center* of our lives. When *God’s* will, not our own, directs our actions and decisions.

In fact, Jesus once summarized the *entire law* in these words, “You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind... And a second is like it,” he said, ‘You shall love your neighbor as yourself.’ On these two commandments,” said Jesus, “hang *all* the law and prophets.”

Happiness, then, is focusing on God, and God's desire for our lives – not our own desires – and then striving to live as God would have us live and not as we might prefer, or want, to live ourselves.

Furthermore, those who focus on discerning and doing God's will, says Psalm 1, will “prosper” in all they do. But here again, however, the translation is a little bit misleading. Because the word “prosper” in English almost always refers to money or material wealth, doesn't it? Hence, the so-called “prosperity gospel” of many TV evangelists who promise that if only we have faith, if only we believe, then God will reward us with material blessings. These TV preachers even go so far to say that if you name it, you can claim it.

Perhaps, a better translation, instead of the word “prosper,” scholars tell us, is the word “thrive.” That is to say, those who focus on discerning and then acting on God's will for their lives will not necessarily prosper in a financial or material sense, but rather they will *thrive*. In other words, they will “grow” and “flourish” just as healthy plants do in nature.

Which, interestingly enough then, is precisely why the psalmist tells us that those who follow God's instructions and God's will for their lives “are like trees planted by streams of water, (that) yield their fruit in its season, and their leaves do not wither.”

...A pastor by the name of Mark Stepherson once talked about the difference between tumbleweeds and mesquite trees. Tumbleweeds are those dried up things that we see blow across the dusty street in all those old movie westerns when the sheriff and the bad guys are about to face off in a gunfight.

To look at these tumbleweeds, you would think that they were always that way; dry, and dead, and blowing away in the wind. But the fact is that in the springtime tumbleweeds actually grow as thick, green bushes. But, then, when the spring rains stop, their shallow roots can no longer

find enough water to sustain them. They wither and fall over. Eventually, their shallow roots are no longer able to even keep them anchored to the ground. So they literally dry up and blow away.

Mesquite trees, on the other hand, which can grow in the very same area where the tumbleweeds grow, are just the opposite. Even after a prolonged drought, if you cut them down, they grow back. If you cut down what grows back, it will grow back again. You could even dig down five or ten feet below ground, cut it down, and burn the stump. But you would then have an entire mesquite *grove* as dozens, if not hundreds, of these severed roots now start sprouting.

You see, that's the big difference between tumbleweeds and mesquite trees. It's in the roots.

And that, says the psalmist, is the difference between the righteous and the wicked. Righteousness and wickedness are not really about what people *do*. Rather, the difference between the righteous and the wicked is that the righteous stay *rooted* in God, and always strive to discern and follow God's will for their lives, while the wicked simply do not. Instead their roots are too shallow. They are not firmly rooted in God's will and God's ways. So, consequently, they wither and die and finally blow away. Just like the chaff that the wind blows away, says our reading this morning.

But those who are deeply rooted in God's will, God's teachings and instructions, will not only experience happiness. But when adversity *does come* (as it will for all of us), and when the going gets tough, they are resilient. Even when they're cut down, figuratively speaking, they grow back; time after time. And it's this connection with God that allows this to happen. It's this connection with God that makes all the difference. It's this connection with God that brings a life that thrives and, therefore, brings *true* happiness.

Jesus once said that the entire law could be summed up in those two simple commandments: Love God and love neighbor. In other words, true happiness occurs, and we as human beings thrive, when we stop focusing merely on *ourselves*, and begin instead to focus on others. After all, loving God and loving others are, in the end, actually one and the same...

A fascinating study was once conducted by Bernard Rimland, the director of the Institute for Child Behavior Research. Rimland discovered through his research that the happiest people are those who help others.

Each person involved in the study was first asked to list ten people he or she knew best and to label them as “happy” or “not happy.” Then they were asked to go through their list again and, this time, label each one as “selfish” or “not selfish” using the following definition of selfishness:

- A tendency to devote one’s time and resources to one’s *own* interests and welfare.
- An *unwillingness* to inconvenience one’s self for others.

In compiling and categorizing the results, Rimland found that nearly all of the people labeled happy were *also* labeled unselfish. And, vice versa, nearly all of the people labeled unhappy were also labeled selfish.

In his conclusion, Rimland wrote, “Those whose activities are devoted to bringing *themselves* happiness... are far less likely to *be* happy than those whose efforts are devoted to making *others* happy.”

This brings us back around full circle, so to speak; to mothers and Mother’s Day. You see, of all the people in the world whose lives are dedicated primarily to making *others* happy, moms are pretty much at the top of the list; wouldn’t you say? Now we certainly can and should do any and all of those thoughtful things that will bring our mothers happiness today. But here’s a little secret that moms already know: The *key* to happiness is in making *others* happy. Amen.

