



Chasing happiness? Rev Richard Bonifant

Year B, Ordinary 21

Ephesians 6:10-20, John 6: 56-69

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Every time I get in the car these days there is a discussion that promptly ensues. Whose music is going to get played in the car. Will it be Dad music, or dare I say it...something worse, children's music. I don't often win that one and as a result I end up with all sorts of children's songs stuck in my head for the rest of the day. The good news is as my daughters have gotten older their taste has slowly improved. I no longer have to listen to a particularly annoying song called *We want everybody happy*.

The lyrics are:

We want everybody happy,
we want everybody happy,
we want everybody happy, happy, happy,
because we don't want anybody sad.

Whether we appreciate it or not, this is a song that sums up what a lot of Christians believe. Not only do we want to be happy, we want to be surrounded by other people who are happy. Sometimes that means that we block out the voices of those who are unhappy and sometimes it means that we bend over backwards to make other people happy.

Happiness seems like a fairly worthwhile goal and certainly resonates with many of us. There are plenty of people out there telling us that happiness is a right, a choice, the only way to live. And yet, happiness is not a principle found within the Gospel narrative. The teaching of Jesus pushes us in many directions, such as love, justice, sacrifice, and inclusion. Pursuing those principles may result in a sense of happiness, but to be honest happiness is not guaranteed.

A number of studies have shown that parents who are attentive and engaged in their children's lives often score lower on measures of happiness than almost anyone else. That is not to say that parenting is an unhappy job. There are many wonderful moments to be had. But good parenting can be exhausting, it requires sacrifice, and at times it can feel like a thankless job. Good parents may not feel high levels of happiness but they gain something far greater. Parenting gives many a sense of purpose and that in turn can life a richer meaning.

One of these studies describes the pursuit of happiness for the sake of happiness in the following way; "Happiness without meaning characterizes a relatively shallow, self-absorbed or even selfish life, in which things go well, needs and desires are easily satisfied, and difficult or taxing entanglements are avoided."¹

At one level that sounds very tempting. Easy choices, greater satisfaction, no conflict or challenges to deal with. That sounds like lying on a beach without a care in the world, and that is a good thing to do sometimes...but not always. Jesus certainly practiced self-care, but he never suggested that we should only travel on easy pathways. Rather time and again, the Gospel moves us to face the difficult challenges of life. Challenges where choices are hard, resolution is not guaranteed, and conflict is highly likely.

Today's Gospel reading follows on from the teaching we have been hearing for what now feels like an eternity. Bread, bread, bread, bread, and yet more bread. Last week Cate drew our attention to the way Jesus spoke so literally of eating his body and drinking his blood. Today's gospel reading tells us that when Jesus spoke in this way, he made many people unhappy. Some of them were so unhappy that they gave up on Jesus and being part of his movement altogether. But Jesus does not attend to this unhappiness. He does not rush over and apologise, or back down in any way. He simply allows those who are unhappy to make their own decision and leaves it at that. That's a surprisingly adult approach to ministry, that some might characterise as unchristian. But it is not unchristian to support others in their right to choose their own pathway, even when their choice has been to throw the toys out of the sandpit.

¹ http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/01/theres-more-to-life-than-being-happy/266805/?single_page=true

So, what was the problem? What was it that Jesus said, that caused some people to turn their back on him? Cate already pointed out to us that the cannibalism suggested by Jesus was not only difficult for people then, but is also unpleasant for us to think about now. Was it this suggestion of cannibalism that made people unhappy?

My suspicion is that those first followers of Jesus may have tolerated the metaphorical language Jesus was using when he described bread as his body. As John Dominic Crossan points out, the people of that time were used to speaking in rich metaphorical language, and much of the biblical canon is evidence of this. Maybe it was when Jesus began to talk about blood that he pushed his luck too far with some of his audience.

For Jewish people the consuming of blood was strictly prohibited. This is as true for Jewish people today as it was in the time of Jesus. The prohibition against blood is an important aspect of kosher eating practices, practices which have shaped a strong sense of Jewish identity. The prohibition on the consumption of blood was one way the Jewish people differed from other tribes and races of people including the Romans. Some of you will have heard of some of the pagan cults of the Roman Empire, in which the consumption of animal blood was an essential part of their rituals.

While I know that in certain cultures the drinking of blood is quite normal, it's not something I'm eager to try and I suspect a few of you are on the same page as me on that one. For Jewish people in the first century the thought of drinking blood, let alone human blood went beyond feeling slightly uncomfortable. By telling his followers that they must eat his flesh and drink his blood, Jesus was being inflammatory and offensive. Not only was he asking them to do something unpleasant, he was also asking them to break with deeply ingrained cultural practices.

There is more to this Gospel passage. While we can see how Jesus offended some by speaking in very concrete terms about eating flesh and drinking blood there is still the question of just what Jesus was trying to express. This was not simply a case of Jesus seeing if he could drive a few followers away by pressing a few buttons. Like all of his teaching there is more to it than what appears on the surface.

If we look at the words in Leviticus that proscribe the consumption of blood we see that God states that blood is sacred because it contains life itself. For Jewish people the relationships here is clear. Life is given by God, it is contained within our blood, but upon our death that life force is intended to return to God. If one drank the blood of another, they would receive the life force in the blood and prevent it from returning to God. And yet this is exactly what Jesus is asking his followers to do. Jesus is suggesting is that the life of God that is in his very blood, need not return to God, but can live on through all who follow him. And that is why some said, this teaching is difficult.

There are also difficulties with that teaching for us today, because many do not understanding that when Jesus spoke of blood, he was really talking about life force. Blood means life. Hymns and liturgical expressions that speak of the power of Christ's blood, often make a theological connection to the sacrifice of the crucifixion, and that makes me deeply uncomfortable because such ideas are built upon a misinterpretation that connects blood with death and sacrifice instead of connecting blood with life itself. The blood of Christ actually refers to the divine life which was fully present in Jesus. We are not redeemed by the blood Jesus shed during his execution, we are brought into closer relationship with God through the divine life that was present in Christ. The good news is not that Jesus died, it is that God chose to live as one of us.

When Jesus spoke about eating his flesh and drinking his blood he was telling us that the same divine life present in him can be experienced in our lives by following his example. Part of that example was not being overly concerned with how happy everyone is. The example of Jesus was to love deeply and wastefully, to challenge authority, and to reach out to those in need. This is not a roadmap towards happiness, but it is a guide to living deep, fulfilling, meaningful lives. Amen.