

*I Have Sent Them Into the World*

Do you spend much time thinking about what it means to be *happy*?

This is hardly a novel question; I've preached on it, everyone from self-help gurus to theologians have rhapsodized about it. One of my favorite editorial series in recent years was in the Atlantic, where Arthur Brooks held forth on how to build a happy life.

Of course, it is possible to spend so much time contemplating a happy life that we forget to notice when a happy life is *actually happening*.

The Psalmist seems to have a great deal of confidence in their answer to that question: A happy life is achieved by meditating on the law of the Lord.

I knew that's the answer you were looking for.

From a purely pragmatic standpoint, meditating on the Decalogue, for instance, could probably help us avoid a great many things that derail happiness: Idolatry, broken relationships, envy, a bad reputation, and even potential jail time.

But do we often contemplate what makes us *happy*?

There is, of course, a constant temptation to dwell on the shadow side of happiness: The difficulties and trials of life. There are few things that annoy me so much as when someone overstates their suffering or oppression. Also, there are probably few things about which I am so hypocritically guilty.

"I'm literally about to drop dead from fatigue."

(No, you're tired. And abusing the English language.)

"I'm dying spiritually."

(More likely you're in a spiritual drought, it happens to everyone.)

One young man I've known for many years annoyed me not long ago by claiming that his free speech was being violated because his offensive language cost him a job. He said so on Facebook. (He's facing consequences, not being oppressed.)

Overstatements of suffering like, "I cannot find a decent latte," are generally just an updated version of the old line, "It's hard to get good help anymore."

And truth be told, for most of us, there's no malice in our lack of self-awareness and insensitivity, we're just wrapped up in what we're experiencing in the moment.

We are wrapped up in *ourselves*.

Most of the time, for most of us, the garden-variety annoyances of life are not obstacles to our ultimate happiness. They are not deep suffering.

But... *that is not always true.*

Sometimes, genuine suffering comes into play.

Sometimes, fatigue is the deep tiredness that comes from being, day in and day out, a caregiver for someone who is the deepest, darkest time of their life, and while we're not going to drop from it, it feels very much like lead weights attached to our limbs.

Sometimes, the spiritual drought extends not for a few days or weeks, but for months on end, and we begin to wonder if the faith that sustained us in times past might not be so reliable now.

And for some people, freedom to speak really *is* limited, and procuring a good latte – or anything to eat, for that matter – is as about inaccessible as flying to the moon.

What then?

Perhaps more than that, sometimes the exercise of discipleship brings one to a moment of real challenge, real suffering, real oppression.

Jesus asks for some pretty specific behaviors from his followers, and they aren't always easy.

What do you believe being a disciple of Jesus Christ entails?

While I know there is a shallow version of discipleship that consists of little more than being on a "saved" list, like an eternal version of TSA pre-check, that's not what I see from this congregation. Some among us have had to make hard decisions about whether or not we can keep a job we desperately needed, in spite of being asked to do things we knew were wrong.

Some of the most privileged among us are also the most generous in time and money, and it arises out of a genuine desire to follow Jesus Christ.

Truly following Jesus can mean that we have to go with him into some dark and difficult places.

When we consider being sent out into the world, as Jesus's disciples most certainly are here in John, *we* also come face-to-face with being asked to go and do the same.

The particulars don't translate to us. We are not living under military occupation. Most of us are not being asked to leave our families and homes.

What we *are* asked to do is to live in a way that is determinedly against the grain.

We are asked to be selfless in a world where Gordon Gecko's proclamation, "Greed is good," often seems more prophetic than it was intended to be.

We are asked to take covenant commitment seriously in a world where marriage can be controversial, but shallow hook-ups are tabloid news.

We are asked to care enough about people we don't know, can't see, will probably never meet, to commit our own treasure to make life a little better, a little easier.

Occasionally, so much discipleship might just wear a bit.

None of us, I suspect, believe that generosity, commitment, and social consciousness are onerous.

But for all of us, a "long obedience in the same direction" might drag on a bit at times.

What then?

What about when faith feels *flat*, or when it's hard to think of the next big thing?

What then? What about when life is neither good nor bad, but just, "meh."

None of that sounds like a great recipe for happiness, so perhaps a reconsideration of the Psalmist's main point is helpful: The Hebrew word we translate as *happy* in our New Revised Standard Bibles is rendered in older translations, *blessed*.

Perhaps we need a way to see *blessedness* when happiness feels illusory. Perhaps, in those times when we are just not *getting* it, or words just aren't big enough to capture what is needed, we need a word from beyond ourselves.

Well, here it is: *Jesus prays for you*.

As Jesus sends out his disciples into the world, into harder circumstances than most of us will ever face, he asks these friends of his to take on the mantle of being his disciples. He asks them to be *like* him, and because he knows what he is asking, what he does for them is to *pray* for them.

The early church questioned whether Jesus was praying for all of human history or just for his disciples in that particular moment, and opted to leave the conclusion ambiguous.<sup>1</sup> I am *convinced* it is the former.

Here is my rationale: in Paul's letter to the Romans, in that famous eighth chapter that has shaped so much of reformed theology, we read that Christ prays for us.

When Jesus sends you out into the world with the expectation that you are going to be Christ-like, he's praying for you. Same for me.

To my mind, that takes our motivations to an even deeper place than being happy, or even being blessed. That takes us to a place of considering Christ's intent for the world, and for each

---

<sup>1</sup> Gerard Sloyan. *John* in *Interpretation*, Mays, Miller, Achtemeier, eds. (JKP, Atlanta 1988) P197

of us. That takes us to the place of *shalom*, of well-being for ourselves, and wishes of well-being for others.

*That is what it is to be Christ-like.*

Should any of us reach that point where we can't pray for ourselves anymore, when our words are exhausted, the Spirit prays for you *with sighs too deep for words*.

That means prayer that isn't necessarily heads-down, hands-folded, but also active, engaging, sustaining – this is prayer that defines life; that defines what it is to be living in Christ's intent for humankind.

Honestly, most of the reward of Christian discipleship is subtle and simple.

Discipleship is a sustaining way of life.

Discipleship is a life grounded in the ground of all being.

Discipleship is a life of meaning, rooted in the truth of Jesus Christ.

But it isn't always a thrill a minute.

Even then, *Jesus prays for us*.

When Jesus asks us to be *him* for the world, he prays for us.

I wonder if the reason Jesus prays for us is because he knows how hard it is to keep energy around something you can't see, and we can't see Jesus, even as we make our best attempts to go into the world and to live the way he taught us to live.

You may have heard the name Scott Neeson associated with such blockbuster films as X-Men, Titanic, and Braveheart from his days as president of 20<sup>th</sup> Century Fox International.

Then he walked away from it all to work against profound poverty when he saw children living amidst chemical waste in the city dump of Cambodia's capital. He describes in vivid detail the experience of being on the phone with a major star who was having a meltdown over the amenities on his private jet, threatening not to get on the plane, and derailing a major tour. "I thought, 'I don't want this to be my world. Here we've got this jet sitting on the tarmac, and I'm sitting with these dying children, and I just wanted to scream into the phone, 'Come down here for a day and see what it's all about!'"<sup>2</sup>

Neeson describes the abundance of wealth that he walked away from when he committed himself full-time to the work of the Cambodian Children's Fund that he founded: The Brentwood mansion, the yacht, the sports car – in short, material success. "I sort of enjoyed it, but I wasn't particularly happy. It was always eating away at me. At some level, I was always

---

<sup>2</sup> *No Return* in [The Life of Meaning: Reflections on Faith, Doubt, and Repairing the World](#), Bob Abernethy and William Bole, eds. (Seven Stories Press, NY, 2007) p390-392

just a little bit discontented. I could never quite put my finger on it, but it didn't seem like it was me. I had no idea I'd be led to this other extreme."

He goes on to talk about the difficult adjustment that he faced when he committed himself to the path he had chosen, due to the horrific things he witnessed.

He muses, "I get asked all the time when I'm coming back. But what happens here if I go home? One thing that didn't quite click – it's such an obvious thing, but it didn't occur to me at the time – was, there's no going back. What would happen here with 170-180 children who are going through the process of changing their lives. It may sound rather pretentious, but they're off the garbage dump, they've got vocational training, they've got an education, they've got a safe place to sleep, and they are really pumping along. They're trying their best. How can you just walk away from that? How can you put them back on the streets? I didn't realize the permanency of what I'd started here until relatively recently.

Finally, he concludes, "I've never been happier in my life. Every day is an emotional roller coaster, but I get up in the morning, and I can't wait to get to work.

How many people in the world can say that?"

I don't know that Neeson is overtly Christian, but he sure is Christ-like.

When we meditate on the law of the Lord as the Psalmist counsels us to do, do you remember what Jesus said is the heart of love?

It is *love*.

Love of God, and love of neighbor, plain and simple.

When Jesus sends us out into the world, it is not to kick us out of home; it is to point us *toward home*.

Perhaps we will be *happy*.

Perhaps we will even be *blessed*.

In the name of the Father, and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.