

BE HAPPY!

“To be happy in Jesus” means to trust and obey. Simple words, but hard to live out in our world of headline catastrophes. Economists, environmentalists, educators, all give us good reason to be filled with pessimism, doubt, despair--- or to become fatalistically apathetic. Sometimes we just have to get a grip and re-center our attitude on something as straightforward and basic as that old hymn that we sang this morning, “Trust and Obey.”

There is an old Jewish joke about a child who hates kreplach dumplings. His mother tries to reassure him and one evening brings him into the kitchen, and stands him next to her as she prepares dinner. “Look,” she says, “Here is the dough. First you flatten it and shape it.” The boy nods happily. “Then you take the filling and lay it across the dough.” The boy nods once more, happy as can be. “Finally, you fold the dough over the filling and you have... Kreplach!” The boy screams and runs sobbing from the room.

In many ways, when it comes to the word “obedience” and the theme of “trust and obey,” we are in the same position as the boy in the story. Each step of the Christian faith suits us fine. We applaud faith. We rejoice when there is talk of love and hope. But then we see what all this has been leading up to; and like the little boy who hated kreplach, we scream, “Oh no, obedience.”

Our text this week is dealing with the essence of what it means to live in the Spirit. There are so many people living “unlived” lives, afraid to step outside the prescribed “safe” boundaries of known experiences. It is the same with too many Christians, they find themselves living an “unspiritual spirituality”, incapable of trusting the wings of the Spirit to carry them beyond their own puny abilities. But the heart of Christian spirituality, what makes it so deeply spiritual, is the spontaneous desire to respond with trust and obedience to Christ’s presence in our lives, as made known to us through the Spirit. This is what the old hymn writer proposes when he specifies that “to be happy in Jesus, means to trust and obey.”

Bobby McFerrin’s 1989 overnight hit “Don’t Worry, Be Happy” (the phrase was lifted from Meher Baba, the Indian spiritual leader who died in 1969) encapsulated much of what was wrong with the greedy, grasping 1980’s. It’s simple, sweet message, sung with a Caribbean lilt and calypso beat, evoked images of carefree lolling on sun-drenched beaches. That the ocean rolling up on these sands was growing more polluted every day, or that the beach itself was littered with debris, or that just inland there were ghettos crowded with unemployed people, none of these were to concern us. We were to let responsibility and reflection pass us by while we put on a Smiley Face and concentrated all our energies on being happy.

Being happy “in Jesus” calls for an entirely different “soul-set.” Where the pop song’s happiness comes from blocking out all signs of need and care, Christian happiness begins when we recognize our handicaps, our heartaches, and cry out for help. Bartimaeus might have remained a blind beggar for the rest of his life if he had not called out so persistently to Jesus as he passed by. The obstacle to Bartimaeus’ happiness was obvious, as a poor blind man he had nothing to look forward to but a life of roadside begging, subsisting on charity and hand-outs.

Bartimaeus refused to be silenced because his trust in Jesus' ability to heal him was so strong. He expected great things from God, indeed nothing less than total healing; trusting in what his heart told him was possible. Fueled by this trusting faithfulness, Bartimaeus responded with enthusiasm to Jesus' command that he be brought to him. In fact the blind man obeys so completely and rapidly that he comes to Jesus apparently before anyone in the crowd can guide him forward. Bartimaeus shows no doubt that his request will be heard and granted by Jesus because his trust is in the Lord.

Duke University psychiatrist Redford B. Williams has written a book called "The Trusting Heart". What he has discovered is that Type A behavior will not kill you. Grueling schedules, workaholicism, stress, hurriedness- all these "Type A" personality syndromes are not predictive of early death. Only hostility, cynicism, aggression, and meanness- these are the real killers. People who cannot trust, people who can only control are in more than spiritual jeopardy. Their health is on the line as well.

The crowd that tried to quiet the boisterous blind man was evidently embarrassed by Bartimaeus' loud, direct method of expressing his needs and petitioning his desires. There were established channels by which to petition the Lord for healing or forgiveness- why didn't Bartimaeus submit to them? The crowd, like so many of us, preferred to put its trust in the Process instead of in the Spirit. But Jesus did not say to Nicodemus, "You must be born of the Process." In fact it is only when we free ourselves from the deep ruts that "following the process" has carved into our lives that we become able to trust in and follow the wings of the Spirit, wherever it may lead.

It goes without saying that the life of obedient discipleship does not promise to be easy. Trusting and obeying would hardly be such difficult traits to master if we were privy to all the plans and plots intertwined around our lives. Discipleship means not knowing where we are going, but finding joy and contentment in knowing that we go there with God.

Two Christian parents overheard their young child's nightly prayers. In great detail the child informed God of the next day's plans, and of all that God could do to make things possible. Finally one of the parents interrupted and said, "Please don't bother giving God instructions. Just report for duty." That is what we need to do. Don't try and tell God what he needs to do. Just be there when he calls.