

# LOSERS KEEPERS, NOT WEEPERS

## Sermon, September 16, 2018

### Texts: Psalm 19; Mark 8:27-37; James 3

The magazine *Atlantic Monthly* had an interesting article January 2013 entitled "*There's More to Life than Being Happy.*"<sup>1</sup> The article pointed out how researchers are beginning to caution against the unbridled pursuit of happiness. They found that a meaningful life and a happy life may certainly overlap in many ways, but are ultimately two very different orientations with contrasting results. In short, the psychologists found that pursuing a happy life is generally associated with being a "taker" while pursuing a meaningful life corresponds with being a "giver" ... and those "takers" who mostly concern themselves with personal comfort and personal gain and personal happiness usually wind up being much more miserable and purposeless than those "givers" who mostly concern themselves with finding fulfillment by contributing whenever and wherever they can. According to the lead researcher of the study, "*What sets human beings apart from animals is not the pursuit of happiness, which occurs all across the natural world, but the pursuit of meaning, which is unique to humans.*"

That article was shared with me by email by a devout and engaging Jewish shopkeeper I met in Jerusalem in 2015; Moshe had given a guest lecture at the school my son had attended that summer, and Steve was eager to have us meet ... which we did, and we really hit it off. Moshe runs a store in the Jewish quarter of the Old City, just a block or so from the Western Wall, and sees his business as a opportunity for ministry and faith dialogue in this historically significant location.<sup>2</sup> (*When we were there in February of this year, our tour guide sort of rushed us through that section of the city as we were on our way elsewhere; I only had time to run into the store and say a very quick "Hello" then ran back out to catch up with the group.*) In that email Moshe referred to the *Atlantic Monthly* article in light of Rosh Hashana; the Jewish New Year (*which, by the way, began at sundown last Sunday and ended with sundown Tuesday – Anno Mundi 5779; Anno Mundi meaning "Year of the World"*). He pointed out Jews don't traditionally wish each other "Happy New Year;" the Hebrew greeting of Rosh Hashana ("*Shanah tovah*") conveys well-wishes for a **good** year, rather than a happy one ... because, after all, there is so much more to life than just being happy! We were put on this earth to be, and do, *good* ... and we find our greatest fulfillment in doing and being just that ... good.

So, I'm almost a week late, but I wish you a "*Shana tova.*" "Have a GOOD New Year!" May you have a GOOD year filled with meaning and purpose ... and happiness will surely follow.

Much of the *Atlantic Monthly* article focused on the thought of famed Viennese psychiatrist and Holocaust survivor Viktor Frankl. When we looked at these lectionary readings before, I told you of the time Viktor Frankl had given an address in Melbourne, Australia, and afterward was presented with a boomerang as a gift ... he received the gift, thought for a few minutes, and then in an impromptu manner commented how he believed the boomerang to be an excellent symbol for human existence. He said people assume the function of the boomerang is to return to the thrower. However, this really isn't true. The boomerang returns to the thrower only when it *misses the target*. He went on to say the same is true for life. We "return" to ourselves, we become self-centered and self absorbed, when we have failed to hit the mark for which we were designed. When we fail to give ourselves to something meaningful, when we fail to expend our energies and our gifts and our talents for something beyond ourselves, then we just "return" to ourselves having accomplished nothing ... and there really is little happiness in that. He concluded his impromptu comments by warning if we live for ourselves, spend our money only on ourselves, if we squander our time, and exert our strength only for those things that make us "happy" and comfortable, we will pay the price of a meaningless, purposeless and, frankly, miserable existence.

In a way, that coincides quite nicely with what Jesus has to say in our Gospel reading this morning: "*For those who want to save their life will lose it. And those who lose their life for my sake, and for the sake of the gospel, will save it.*" (Mark 8:35-36). I've mentioned this before, too, but my goal as a pastor is to be

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.theatlantic.com/health/archive/2013/01/theres-more-to-life-than-being-happy/266805/>

<sup>2</sup> Moshe's shop can be "explored" at <https://www.shorashimshop.com>

pastor of a dying church full of losers. Yes, you heard me right. It is not my goal to be a pastor of a happy church full of "takers" who are primarily concerned with being comfortable; I want to be a part of a "dying" church full of "losers," and every serious Christian should desire to be part of such a church ... a church just full of people eager to "lose" their lives for Jesus' sake, dying to themselves and living for Jesus, a "boomerang" church that doesn't want to spend its energies merely circling around to bless itself, but is determined to find fulfillment in hitting the target(s) the Lord aims for her to hit! I'm convinced such a "dying" church full of such "losers" is the only church that will be truly alive and thriving and good and fulfilled. "Denying ourselves" has to do with denying that we are our own. If we want to be Jesus' disciples, we have to give up the self-autonomy that says, *"I don't care what God says, this is my life and I'm going to live it as I choose and do what I think it takes to be happy."* It sounds somewhat oxymoronic, but a dying church in this sense is a dynamic church. I know many of you here share my desire to be part of a dynamic church that has purpose and meaning extending beyond ourselves; we want to be good and effective instruments in the hands of our Lord ... and our Psalmist would tell us that process begins with the **words of our mouths** and the **meditations of our hearts**.

Psalm 19 is a celebration of God's wisdom, revealed not only in the world around us, but given to us in written form through God's Law. The Psalmist proclaims the law of the Lord is perfect, right, clear, pure, and sure (*and it will make your life right, clear, pure and sure!*). It revives the soul, makes wise the simple, gives joy to the heart, gives light to the eyes, and gives us better perspective to see the world and understand our own place within it, if only we would read it and meditate upon it. The Psalm ends, *"Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be pleasing in Your sight, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer."* That's a prayer that should be prayed by all of us, every day, ideally at the beginning of the day. The first step to a meaningful existence is when the **words of our mouths** and the **meditations of our hearts** are pleasing in God's sight ... when that happens, we and all around us are the much better off for it.

In the epistle reading, James elaborates on this theme by specifically focusing on the words of our mouths. He goes on to say that if we can control the tongue we can control the whole body; but if the tongue is uncontrolled, the whole of life can be set on wrong and destructive paths. It really can direct the whole course of human lives for good or ill. Our words matter! Someone once pointed out that God the Creator knew what He was doing when He placed this dangerous appendage behind two fences ... the teeth and the lips ... in order to help us keep this potentially lethal weapon under control. Don't open either of those "fences" without giving clear thought to what's going to be let out!

I like the "THINK" test of Alan Redpath. He wrote, *"If what I'm about to say does not pass the THINK test, I will keep my mouth shut! What is the 'THINK' test? Before you speak, ask yourself: Is what I'm about to say **I** - Is it true? **H** - Is it helpful? **I** - Is it inspiring, uplifting? **N** - Is it necessary? And **K** - Is it kind? Especially "kind."* Mother Theresa once said, *"Kind words can be short and easy to speak, but their echoes are truly endless."* The echoes of harsh words can be endless, as well. As someone wisely put it, one reason people love dogs so much is that their tails wag instead of their tongues.

James continues, verse 13: *"Who is wise and understanding among you? Let him show it by his good life, by deeds done in the humility that comes from wisdom."* Some of you may know the context of our Gospel reading is that this scene took place two and a half years *into* Jesus' public ministry, which means He spent two and a half years showing who He was before asking them, *"Who do you say I am?"*

Who do the people around us say WE are? Jesus' younger brother James says to us, *"Show who you are by your good life, by your good words, by your deeds done in humility that came from wisdom..."* Verse 17-18: *"The wisdom that comes from above is first of all pure; then peace-loving, considerate, submissive, full of mercy and good fruit, impartial and sincere. Peacemakers who sow in peace raise a harvest of righteousness."*

Let us embrace the paradoxical wisdom of God by losing our lives for Jesus sake, and thus find our fullest meaning and highest purpose. And to that end let us make every effort to let the words of our mouths and the meditations of our hearts be pleasing in the sight of God, our Rock, and our Redeemer.