

Define Happy

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Bread for the World Sunday
Twenty-Second Sunday after Pentecost
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1 Kings 12:3 – 7
James 1:19 – 2:7
Mark 10:35 – 45

Text: And he said to them, “What is it you want me to do for you?” – Mark 10:36

World Food Day was Friday, October 16, a little more than a week ago. It was a day where caring people around the world declared a commitment to eradicate hunger in our lifetime. That’s why on one Sunday in October, today October 25, Faith UCC dedicated a morning message to the teachings and work of Bread for the World.

Define Happy... The title of this morning’s message came from a Funky Winkerbean comic that was printed in the Plain Dealer back in May of this year. I love to read the comics, not only because they put a smile on my face in the midst of the sad news we read sometimes, but once in a while there is a good life lesson that comes out of them. This, I believe, is one of those. Let me set the stage... Through the magic of a time machine, one teenage character in the comic strip gets to meet and talk with her older self, several decades out. Perhaps 30 or more years out. This teenage character has a reputation amongst the other Funky Winkerbean characters as being a person who is overfilled with “me,” always in pursuit of glamour. So here’s what the comic strip said. The teenage self asks, “Are you, me, we, us... you know, happy?” The older self says, “Define happy.” Then the teenage self says, “that’s what I was afraid of.”

We all, in some manner, go through our lives trying to figure this out – happy. What is happy? How can I be happier? We all have our own definition of happy – even if it is hard to put into a concise set of words.

In this morning’s Gospel lesson from Mark, the disciples James and John seemed to be having a ridiculous interchange with Jesus, which could possibly be construed as a grab for eternal happiness. James and John first stated, “Teacher, we want you to do for us whatever we ask of you.” Jesus played along by saying, “What is it you want me to do for you?” Then the two asked, “Grant us to sit, one at your right hand and one at your left, in your glory.” And this was coming from two brothers who until they started following Jesus, were mending nets and working in their father Zebedee’s fishing business on the Sea of Galilee. My, my, they’ve developed a new feeling of power.

Then Jesus said to them, “you don’t know what you are asking” and Jesus went on to explain to James and John that this request to be on the right and the left in glory is not for Jesus to grant. Now all of this occurred in front of the other ten disciples who got angry with James and John. We’re not sure why the other ten were angry. Perhaps they were jealous. Then Jesus imparted his wisdom in words that are well known to us. Jesus said, “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave to all.”

So what is the point of this interchange? Was Jesus simply giving us a lesson that we should watch out for being self-centered, watch out for taking a quick grab for “me,” taking a quick grab at what we might perceive as “happy”? No I think the author Mark chose this ridiculous interchange to show something more.

It is no coincidence that if we back up a few chapters in the Gospel of Mark from Chapter 10 to Chapter 6, we see the story of Herod, his daughter Herodias and John the Baptist, who was in Herod’s prison. I think the author Mark wanted us to discover the similarity between the words in chapter 6 and the words in chapter 10. I also think Mark wanted us to recognize the stark contrasts, particularly the stark contrast of what Herod did and what Jesus did.

Here’s the Chapter 6 story; this should be a familiar story to you. See if you can pick out the similarities and the contrasts to the Chapter 10 story.

King Herod gave himself a birthday party, a birthday banquet, and many of the officers and leaders of Galilee were invited and were in attendance. Herod’s daughter danced, and apparently danced quite well, because the Bible indicates that not only was Herod pleased, the banquet guests were pleased. So Herod said to his daughter, “Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.” And then Herod solemnly promised in front of his guests, “Whatever you ask me, I will give you, even half of my kingdom.”

Herod’s daughter didn’t know what to ask for, so she consulted her mother who planted the idea about killing John the Baptist (who the mother really didn’t like). So Herod’s daughter went back to her father and asked, “I want you to give me at once the head of John the Baptist on a platter.” Sounds like a ridiculous request, right? - especially coming from someone’s daughter!

Mark 6 says that Herod struggled with the decision. But because he made a promise in front of his guests, Herod immediately sent one of his soldiers to kill John the Baptist and bring in his head on a platter. The soldier gave the platter containing John’s head to Herod’s daughter and Herod’s daughter gave the platter and head to her mother.

So compare the characters, James and John vs. Herod. Compare James and John vs. Herod’s daughter. Compare Herod vs. Jesus. Jesus said, “What is it you want me to do for you?” Herod said, “Ask me for whatever you wish, and I will give it.” Jesus imparted some wisdom to his disciples. And Herod, well...you know what he did!

I think Mark was trying to give us a lesson on, what it means to be a good leader, what it means to be a public servant, what it means to be a servant leader.

There are some leaders in our government today, particularly at the federal level, who operate a little like Herod. They have an attitude such that they would like nothing more than to have folks like us go away with our agendas to help those who are hungry and those who are in poverty. Let's not give them what they want. Let's stay the course and fight for those who have no voice.

I know it can be frustrating but let's continue to make sure that the modern-day Herods know that it is not OK to think they have power over all, and answer to no one. Let's make sure that the modern-day Herods know it is not OK to please just the "haves" but offer little more than "try harder" for the "have nots" of our world. And finally, let's make sure that those leaders who came from humble beginnings, know it is not OK to let the perceived power go to their head, forgetting what it means to be a servant leader.

So as I draw this morning's message to a close, please remember the words of the other New Testament reading from this morning. That's the reading from James, who was the brother of Jesus. James found it important to put together the teachings of both "faith and works," both "faith and doing."

So where you see the Herods of today, where you see the stark contrast of how it is and how it should be, trust in your faith to find a way through the frustration to a path of "doing," to a path of standing up for how it should be. Let's bring a new definition to happy. Amen.