



## LESSONS for LIFE

March 9, 2008

**HAPPINESS NOW**

**INTERNAL CHALLENGES**

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### SACRED READINGS

**Lesson:** Excerpts from Robert Holden's "Happiness Now"

**Gospel:** LUKE 4: 1 – 13

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During this season of Lent we are in the midst of a sermon series entitled *Happiness Now* based on a book by Robert Holden called *Happiness Now* and all the sermons up to and including today take their key points from this book. It's kind of the foundation points in the series. For the next three Sundays we will not be focusing on the quotes from the book as much as we will be talking about their implications for us today. Next Sunday is Palm Sunday and so we'll take a look at *How Would Jesus have handled this*. On Good Friday we'll take a look at what we need to lay down in order to move on to new life and on Easter Sunday we'll talk about walking into the light and into that new life. The basis of this book is that happiness is something that we always search for outside of ourselves; indeed our friends to the south have it embedded into their Constitution: Life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness: going to find it. Holden's premise that happiness is really within us and as long as we look outside we won't find it. We may occasionally visit it, there may be occasional moments of joy or happiness but it will not be the way we live our lives until we go inside. Indeed, the scriptures say, *Rejoice always, again I say rejoice*; that rejoicing and celebration is to be our way of life. Jesus said, *My joy is in you so that your joy may be full*. How do we live that kind of joyful, happy lives in the midst of circumstances of our world and the individual circumstances of our lives. That's what this series is about.

Last week we took a look at external circumstances and we talked about how happiness – for most of us – is dependent or we think it's dependent on a set of external circumstances and how instead of it being a set of external circumstances Holden says that we will never be happy unless we are happy with ourselves; that we will not be happy with what we have, or wherever we live; we will not be happy with who we live with unless we are happy with ourselves; that external circumstances can influence us but they don't make the decisions. We make the decisions about our own happiness. Today we want to shift a bit from the external circumstances to internal challenges and the key challenge internally that we face is this internal dialogue that happens in our heads; and if we were able to take this internal dialogue and play it back to ourselves and listen to it, most of us would probably be quite shocked about the kind of self-talk that goes on in our heads because most of it is about judgment. It's about self-judgment. We're not good enough; we screwed up again; we could never do that right; self-judgment instead of it being about self-acceptance, celebrating our strengths, celebrating who we are. Our internal dialogue becomes much more about the scarcity, what we don't have in our lives, than it is about the abundance, the goodness that's there. Now, both exist. Scarcity exists and I'm not denying the reality and abundance exists. The issue is – what do we focus on? I'm going to show you a slide for just a moment. If you look at this slide some of you will see in it an elderly woman. Some of you will see a very stylish younger woman. How many of you see the older woman in this slide? How many of you see the younger woman in this slide? How many of you see both? (a show of hands each time) – especially if you've seen this slide before. The reality is there is both: the older woman and the younger woman in the slide and once you've focused a certain way and looked at it a certain way, and in my case as someone painfully pointed out to me the other person, then you probably only see one perspective. Both of them are there. Once you



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see the new perspective it's easier to see it again. I want to show you another slide. Now - this is not an advertisement for a company that is sponsoring the church – yet; it's not that. How many of you in the past have noticed the arrow in this slide? It takes awhile to see the arrow between the E and the X but for years I have seen that symbol and have never noticed the arrow in the ad, but once you see that arrow then it's hard not to notice it. Now both the letters E and X (FEDEX) and the arrow are there; I'm not denying either reality. What I'm saying is that when you don't see the bigger picture, when you don't see the whole of what's there you only focus on a part of it. In my life I describe myself as being a crack in the vase person. You can put a very beautiful vase here and if there is the tiniest of cracks in that vase, that's where my focus will go and I won't see the beauty of what exists here; I'll just see the crack or the piece of frayed carpet in the building, or the window that needs to be repaired in the building; or I will see the injustice in a law that happens. Now, as a crack in the vase person I think I bring some strength to a situation. There is some goodness in that because I will see the thing that needs to be fixed and I will focus on the thing in the building that needs to be repaired; or I will work at changing a law or changing a system that's unjust. The challenge comes about where I live. Do I live focusing only on the crack in the vase or the thing that needs to be fixed? And if I live in that space, focusing on that too much, then I become picky, I become overwhelmed, I become sometimes difficult to live with or work with and I have to work on myself to see what I see but also to see the fuller context of the situation.

In our lives there are times when we experience pleasure and goodness and for some of us that sixty seconds of joy or those moments of goodness or bliss become exceptions to the rule. We become less and less comfortable with prolonged happiness. We become very uncomfortable with full-blown joy in our lives and we might ask ourselves questions like, *How much happiness can I really handle? How long can I really receive this love?* We become anxious and suspicious and we begin to mistrust the goodness we are experiencing. Happiness and self-acceptance go hand in hand. Holden argues in his book that our level of self-acceptance determines our level of happiness and if we're always looking at ourselves and finding the problems, finding the frailties, finding the things that need to be fixed in ourselves, if that is the low level of our self-acceptance then that will become the level of our happiness. It's almost like that this is your self-judgment, this is your low self-esteem, this is judging yourself and judging others and happiness will only come once in awhile and it will butt up against that level and stop; whereas if we're able to remove that self-judgment, remove that guilt then happiness will be able to spring up and be experienced much much more in our lives. His way of putting it is that we enjoy as much happiness as we believe ourselves worthy of and we suffer as much pain as we believe ourselves worthy of.

Now back to our inner dialogue. There's this pesky little voice in our heads. Jesus experienced this and he named it Satan or the devil; and this little voice in his head said, *Jump off the roof of the temple. Worship me,* and Jesus instead recognized the value of not saying yes to that voice that would lead us astray. There are so many times in our lives when the goodness occurs and we say it won't last or we say we don't deserve it, or we say, "Remember when....it happened before." There's a phrase I learned recently called "catastrophising," and that's a situation where something happens in your life or begins to go in a difficult direction and you then blow it all out of proportion into a huge catastrophe: *Oh my goodness, I'm going to get fired. I was late this morning. Or, My partner doesn't love me anymore because I forgot something I was supposed to have done for him/her* – like an anniversary, or birthday or something important. I would encourage you to compare that to assuming good intent. If you are able to shift from 'catastrophising' to assuming good intent it's amazing how your blood pressure will lower and life will be much more enjoyable. Our happiness and our ability to overcome the internal challenges we face – like sadness and feelings of isolation and not belonging – have a lot to do with our ability to silence that internal voice or at least to get it to shift from what it's saying to us. Therapists call it 'cognitive therapy.'



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Holden has his three-step path to happiness. It's the recognition of the love and the peace and the joy within you; it was a previous sermon. He also has a three-part path to hearing a different internal voice and it's called 'de-guiltying', stopping self-judgment and embracing self-acceptance. In Holden's words, *We long for happiness but we judge ourselves too guilty to accept it.* Now please don't dismiss this quickly as some new-age thought. I believe that in this there is deep, deep truth. So what about this guilt thing? Guilt, simply defined, is the belief that we do not deserve our own happiness; that because of something we've done or not done that we believe we're not good enough, that we're bad, that we're nothing or we're worthless. Now, I'm not going to name this religious tradition, but there is a religious tradition out there that has taught people how unworthy they are and over the years – many, many times when I'm serving communion, when I'm just about ready to give the host to someone, they blurt out, "I am unworthy to receive. Only say the word and I shall be healed." Now I'm not a violent person, but I want to smack 'em!" (laughter). Now someone's already told me that it's not a good thing to do just before you serve communion, but I wish I had a buzzer so I could go buzzzzzz, you know. Some of you know which tradition I'm talking about. That idea that you're not worthy to receive is exactly opposite to the truth. Jesus said, *Whosoever will may come.* Jesus thought you were worthy enough that Jesus gave everything to make sure that you heard that you were worthy enough. If we believe that we are created in the image of God, then at our core the God in us is worthy enough. Not scarcity but abundance, not judgment but celebration. Our guilt belongs to ego; everything good outside does not belong to our true selves. For some people guilt is not just an emotion that's felt when a mistake was made. For some people guilt has become a way of life. This belief in your own unworthiness has hampered your ability to be able to experience true happiness: de-guiltying.

Secondly: Ending self-judgment. In order for us to experience happiness we have to put away the thing about deserving it; we have to claim it. We have to put away this belief that we have to work for it; and instead claim it, or earn it or pay for it. Instead we have to adopt the belief that happiness is our way of being. Now for some of us this is a major challenge because it means we have to relinquish our identity as a martyr, as a sufferer, as a victim or as an ex-addict. It means reclaiming our identity as joy-filled, peace-filled, love-filled, a reflection of the image of God. Now, before the twelve-steppers go at me in the social hall, I understand the value of being able to recognize where you've come from and what you've been through and the temptations you continue to face, but your identity is not that. Your identity is love-filled, peace-filled, joy-filled image of God. Beginning in that place and staying in that place is crucial for happiness. So, what do we need to let go of? To stop telling ourselves that we're not worthy. We need to remember God in us, peace and love and joy in us. Holden suggests that without self-acceptance peace is impossible. Without self-acceptance joy is unattainable. Without self-acceptance love has to wait. I don't do this kind of back and forth say-after-me thing very often, but I want to practice something this morning. I'm going to say a phrase and I want you to repeat that phrase after me: *God in me; I am worthy. Love lives here. Peace lives here. Joy lives here; happiness is mine.* If those six phrases became a way of life for you, if that became your inner talk and not the scarcity, not the unworthiness, not the anxiety, but if your inner talk became *God in me. I am worthy. Love lives here. Peace lives here. Joy lives here. Happiness is mine* then we would put aside the guilt, we would put aside the judgment. You know, guilt-living and judgment-living cause you only to see a small part of the landscape. When you put aside guilt and judgment then you're able to see a much fuller picture of what the landscape it like and instead of seeing the mistake you'll be able to see the goodness and maybe for the first time really see the fullness of sunrise and sunset. Many folks talk about the first time they ever saw the sea; when they thought life was only the river or the stream or the brook, but somehow they were able to visit the ocean and see the sea for the very first time and how much of a wider landscape that provides. I would encourage you to set aside guilt and judgment and unworthiness and I would encourage you that whenever that voice begins to



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Speak to you in your head to interrupt that and instead replace that with the language of celebration and worthiness image of God, the language of love and peace and joy.

Amen.