

“How to be Happy...and Still Be in Your Right Mind” by Michael Cheuk 10/15/17

Psalms 23; Isaiah 25:1-9; Matthew 22:1-14; **Philippians 4:1-9**

“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice!” Thus wrote the apostle Paul while under house arrest in Rome. He was waiting for his trial before the Emperor Nero, who would determine his fate and his future.

How can one be joyful in such a situation?

The first step is to ask: What are the facts?

In recent months, there’s a lot of talk about the danger of refugees coming into our country. According to the libertarian Cato Institute 2015 report, the annual chance of an American being killed from a terrorist attack committed by a refugee is one in 3.64 billion. That’s .09 Americans a year.¹ On the other hand, did you know that TV’s kill 176 Americans a year...by literally falling on people? Dogs kill 28 Americans per year. Elevators kill 27 Americans per year.²

The second step is to ask: What’s the story?

Now, reality-based facts may be illuminating, but they don’t seem to have much influence over calming our fears and anxieties. That’s because we human beings are not persuaded much by facts. Therefore, the second step we need to ask is “What’s the story?” We are persuaded by the stories we tell ourselves (or stories being told to us), and we then choose the “facts” to fit our stories. Some of these stories are the ones we tell about ourselves. Others are stories we tell ourselves about other people and situations. When we believe these stories, we are primed to look for evidence to confirm that narrative. It’s called confirmation bias. It’s what we think and the stories we tell that influences how we feel and act.

The third step is to notice: What’s the context?

The first step is to get the facts. The second step is to be aware of the story. The third step is to notice: What’s the context? In seminary, my Bible professors always reminded us that we must understand the context of the biblical passage before we can interpret it correctly.

In our Gospel lesson today, we heard what is – in my own thinking – the craziest, most violent and most vindictive parable in the whole Bible. The only hope I have for understanding it is to consider its context: Jesus had just cleansed the Temple and angrily denounced the abuse of the Jewish religion. Then Jesus tells this parable, not to his disciples, but to the religious leaders who questioned his authority and were plotting to kill him. Jesus pulls no punches in this parable of judgment directed toward the religious leaders of his day. This isn’t a parable that I would preach to a congregation. But I would preach this parable to the hypocritical religious leaders of our day. Context makes all the difference.

Fact. Story. Context. The final step to help keep us in the right mind is asking: **“What is the frame?”**

¹ <http://www.businessinsider.com/chances-of-being-killed-by-a-refugee-2017-2>. (You’re more 163,801 times more likely to be killed by a native-born American than by a foreign-born refugee.)

² <http://theantimedia.org/10-things-more-likely-to-kill-you-than-islamic-terror/>

Visualize a frame of a picture or a painting. A frame helps us to see in a certain way, and sometimes, a different frame can help us see a picture differently. In fact, museum professionals argue that a frame can be just as important as the art it holds.

The church in Philippi was going through some conflict and uncertain times. That's why Paul encouraged the church in Philippi to reframe the situation and think about whatever is true, whatever is noble, whatever is right, whatever is pure, whatever is lovely, whatever is admirable, anything that is excellent or praiseworthy.

In the short time I've been with you, I've heard this story about Peakland Baptist. "We're an aging congregation, and while we used to have young families and children, we don't any more. Would any pastor want to come to a church like ours?"

So, let me tell you what I'm seeing. Here are some facts and contexts. This congregation may be aging, but you have some of the most accomplished people I have ever met...judges, former police chiefs, engineers, professors, teachers, poets, artists. Many young people and families would love to learn from your experience, wisdom and secret to success. This church has a fabulous facility that is in very good shape. You have the financial resources to experiment and launch creative ministry initiatives. You are located in a desirable neighborhood, and you have parking and green space. You are open to many different expressions of Christianity, and you welcome a diversity of perspectives and approaches to faith. So, instead of lamenting that you are a small enclave of progressive Christians (of a baptistic flavor) in a sea of conservative evangelicals, I'd say embrace and celebrate who you are and shout it out from the mountaintop! There are people in this area who are desperately looking for a church like Peakland, and there are ministers who would jump at the chance to preach and pastor at a church such as this.

Exercise: If YOU were to describe Peakland Baptist's strengths in three words or less, what would it be? Write it down in the bulletin. Spend a moment to give thanks to God for that quality in this church.

As you're doing this exercise, what are you feeling?

The joyful happiness that Paul wrote about is not dependent on external circumstances or "encouraging words" that well-meaning people or preachers tell you. This happiness is a result of thanksgiving in a loving God who is more invested in the present and future of Peakland Baptist than any of us are. This happiness is a result of putting into practice the strengths of this church for the blessing of this community.

During this time of transition, hear these words of Paul again: "Do not be anxious, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God. And the peace of God, which transcends all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Whatever you have learned or received or heard from me, or seen in me-- put it into practice. And the God of peace will be with you." Amen.