

Be Bold to Be Happy

Deuteronomy 31: 5-8 & Matthew 5:1-16

June 13, 2021

This is the season of graduations, especially high school graduations, and we want to take time to celebrate them and bless them here in our faith community. We have four high school graduates this year: Dorothy Adams, Ben Keenan, Nate Meyer, and Anne Ribordy. I had a privilege to get to know two of them, Anne and Nate at the ASP trip two years ago. We were in the same team that Ed Porrett and Bill Murphy were leaders. Both Anne and Nate were hard workers. Anne was smart and assertive knowing what she wanted to do and how she wanted to do the job in her ways. Nate was smart and precise. He was a veteran worker knowing so much and so experienced. He was a junior engineer of our team. And I got to know Ben whenever I visited GUMY meetings. All of them are kind and thoughtful young persons. No matter how much we know them personally, all of us are happy for them, especially, at this time when they move on the next chapter of their life. Our joy today for them is more real because we know their heartbreaking experiences with the current Covid pandemic. Due to the pandemic, these young people lost so much: Time with friends, school activities, social activities, and the opportunities to explore the world directly. They endured so much stress, loneliness, and frustrations. They worked hard to figure out new ways of study, applying colleges, or staying connected with the world. These young people's struggles are heartbreaking, but today we are celebrating their resiliency and want to encourage them to keep moving on and keep marching on.

The Israelites were wandering in the wilderness for forty years without knowing when their struggles and hardship would be ended. They lost their lifestyles that they had in Egypt for four hundred years. They had their ways of making food, raising families, washing their cloths, building communities, and communicating with the world. But they lost all of them when they left Egypt. They lost their ways of living, as we lost so much of our ways of living during the pandemic. In the wilderness they complained, cried, and sometimes acted out of control. But every evening they pitched the tabernacle, the temporary temple, under Moses' guide and prayed to their God. And every morning they got up, folded the tabernacle, their family tents, and moved on or marched on. They did that for forty years. So far, we have lived with the pandemic for a little bit more than one year. We are exhausted and we miss the old ways of living. We want to go back to them. But we know that we have to march on forward not backward. For Israelites, it was marching toward God's promised land, Canaan. Before they entered that promised land, Moses gave them the last instruction saying, "Be strong and be fearless. Don't be afraid and don't be scared. The Lord your God is the one who marches with you."

Here, I want to invite you to think where we are to march to through the pandemic and out of it. We know that we cannot and should not go back to the old ways, such as a rat racing of working, accumulating, hoarding, and then spending beyond our abilities to catch up the neighbors or friends, or endless seeking of instant satisfactions. For Israelites, the promised land was the new destination where honey and milk flowed. For the ancient Israelites, honey

and milk were not the symbol of the life of rich, famous, and full stomach, but happiness. They marched on toward happiness: happiness to be free, to worship their God, to build the community and raise the family according to the Torah, the law that God gave them in the wilderness through Moses. When Jesus gave a great sermon on the mountain, he pointed them again to march toward the promised land: happiness. When our nation and the world slowly come out of the pandemic, I feel like to hear the voice of Moses and Jesus telling us to keep marching toward happiness, not going back to endless competitions, greed, lies, delusions, and full of empty words and self-pity. No. We are to march toward happiness.

In his sermon on the mountain, Jesus says, happy are people who are hopeless, grieve, humble, hungry and thirsty for righteousness, merciful, having pure hearts, making peace, harassed because they are righteous, and insulted because of Jesus. That's happiness. But these are not the things that we mostly think as happiness. And it's hard to imagine for us why Jesus says these are happy ones, until we know someone who is truly happy. Several days ago, Chicago Tribune had a story about a man, Scott Baeseman. He was a music teacher at Lake Forest Country School and lay Episcopalian chaplain at the Highland Park Police Department. At age 52 he was diagnosed with brain cancer, in January this year. Can you imagine how hopeless he was in front of his mortality at age 52? Jesus says, "Happy are people who are hopeless, because the kingdom of heaven is theirs." In his hopelessness Mr. Baeseman marched toward happiness. He posted a photo of a red flower on his facebook along with five exclamation marks for its beauty and a question saying, "I wonder why it is that God is beginning to call me back when there is still so much beauty that I enjoy here?" Timothy Keller who is the founding pastor of Redeemer church in Manhattan, New York, attracting tons of young people to his church recently says in his facebook, "Religious people find God useful, growing Christians find God beautiful." He tells those young Christians who follow him to keep growing and marching toward finding God in all beauty and that's happiness. In his hopelessness Mr. Baeseman found beauty and joy in every moment of the last days of his life and experienced the kingdom of heaven was his. He and his ex-husband who died a couple of years ago adopted two siblings when it was rare that gay couples were allowed to adopt. The youngest one graduated from high school this year and Mr. Baeseman was full of joy. He planned to marry a man, his new beloved, in August but they changed the plan after his diagnosis and married last May. In their honeymoon he found joy and beauty even in their griefs. Jesus said, "Happy are people who grieve, because they will be made glad." Though in a couple of days of their honeymoon, his health got worsen and they had to come home, he was made glad in his grief. That's happiness. On the last day of his life, he asked his sister to drive him in her convertible car to the high school he graduated from in his hometown. They did it and he asked her to do it one more time. They did it again. That was his last march toward happiness. He died that day in his sleep peacefully when his husband and sister took a brief rest.

Not only high school graduates but all of us, young and old, are marching toward something and somewhere. I believe Jesus' beatitude is our north star guiding us toward true happiness, the promised land. We need to be bold, do not be afraid, or fearful or scared. It is a new way of living experiencing the kingdom of heaven in the beauty of God, being made glad in griefs, being merciful, and being called the children of God. As Moses said, the Lord our God is the one

who marches with us. But God won't march with us to the old ways of living which is leading us to sin and death. God is marching with us toward true happiness. Be bold to be happy. Thanks be to God.