

In the book All I Really Needed to Know I learned in Kindergarten, Robert Fulghum tells how one night in December someone knocked on his door. When he opened it, he found a boy wearing a Santa Claus mask and holding a paper bag. Before he could say anything, the child shouted “*Trick or Treat!*” Unsure how to respond, he just stood there gawking at the sight. Then it dawned on him that this was Hong Duc, the son of a Vietnamese family down the street. He had first met Hong Duc at Halloween when he and his siblings stopped on their trek through the neighborhood. On that night he had been dressed presumably as a Wise Men, wearing a bathrobe and a kitchen towel wrapped around his head. “*A little confused about American holidays*” he laughed to himself at the time. But this sight was even funnier.

But before he could say anything to clear up the boy’s confusion about American holidays, Hong Duc asked “*wanna hear some caroling?*” Thinking this might be interesting, Fulghum said yes, and looked for the rest of the heavenly host. He was sure Hong Duc’s siblings would be there somewhere, ready to spring out if the offer was accepted. But not seeing anyone else, he asked “*Where’s the choir?*” “*I’m it!*” Hong Duc said with a smile. He then belted out his own version of Jingle Bells, followed by something like Hark the HAIRY Angels Sing. Finally, he held up his paper bag, and after receiving five dollars, ran off.

While confused about American holidays, he had 1 thing right: Christmas is a time of JOY! Christmas is a time of CHEER, GOOD-WILL, HAPPINESS. And Christmas is a time when (in the words of a Reggae song popular years ago) God says “*Don’t Worry; Be Happy.*” That is because in the birth and life of Jesus, God began the process of overcoming the sorrows of this sinful world. In the birth and life of Jesus, God began the process of conquering the depressing ills of this mortal life. And in the birth and life of Jesus, God began the process saving us from the evils that have caused gloom and doom to hover over humanity ever since Adam and Eve.

Unfortunately, while we know this reality is true, and we know that God encourages us not to worry but to be happy, it is easy to get bogged down in the difficulties of life - particularly over the last year with all the problems the pandemic created. This can be seen in the story of a ninety four year old man who was on the Johnny Carson show a number of years ago. He was full of life. And he seemed genuinely happy. His remarks seemed unrehearsed and joy seemed to just bubble up out of him. When asked about this, he said there really wasn’t much of a secret to living in such a way, and then explained that when we wake up each day we have two choices: we can choose to be happy or we can choose to be unhappy. He said he just chooses to be happy.

As Christians, we know it is not that simple however. Like being righteous, we do not have it in us to be joyful and happy naturally. To be joyful and happy, we must therefore ask God to help us live in such ways. This is because joy is a fruit of the Spirit, and only becomes ours when we learn how to ask God to plant that fruit in our hearts, and then cultivate it in choosing through the power of God’s grace to seek to “be happy” each day we wake up. To do that asking, however, we need to strive to do several things.

First, we need to strive to enter into - and live in - relationship with Jesus. For while there are many paths that promise joy and happiness, there is only 1 path that actually leads to people experiencing joy and happiness: relationship with Jesus. We see this in the story of a missionary who was flying home after the Korean War had ended. A group of soldiers sat behind her, and they were celebrating. All through the flight they kept offering her drinks and cigarettes. Each time she refused, saying *"No thank you, I don't need it."* When they arrived at the airport, one of the soldiers approached her and said *"Each time we offered you a cigarette or a drink you said, 'No thanks, I don't need it.' Could you explain what you meant?"* *"Certainly,"* she said, *"When you take a drink or smoke a cigarette, you do it because you are seeking happiness, right? You are seeking to put a little joy in your life, correct?"* *"Yes,"* the soldier said. *"I already have all the joy I need,"* she explained, *"so I don't need to use a drink or a cigarette to find it."* *"Where did you get your joy?"* the soldier asked. *"It comes from Jesus,"* she said, *"and Jesus alone."*

We see this in the gospel passage when Jesus told His disciples *"Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are those who mourn, for they will be comforted. Blessed are the meek, for they will inherit the earth. [And] Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be filled."* For it is only when we strive to enter into - and live in - relationship with Jesus that we can be *"poor in spirit"* rather than full of ourselves. It is only when we strive to enter into - and live in - relationship with Jesus that we can *"mourn"* our sins to the extent that we repent and seek God's forgiveness. And it is only when we strive to enter into - and live in - relationship with Jesus that we can be *"meek"* enough get up each day with *"hunger and thirst for righteousness"* rather than think we are already righteous enough. To find true joy and happiness, however, we need to do more than just individually strive to enter into - and live in - relationship with Jesus.

We also need to strive to enter into - and live in - relationship with the followers of Jesus that we call 'the Church.' For while there is only one path that leads to people experiencing joy and happiness, we need to travel that path in the company of people on that same journey in order to experience the fullness of the joy and happiness God wills to give us. We see this in something that Cyprian, the bishop of Carthage, wrote to his friend Donatus in AD 248. *"This seems to be a cheerful world, Donatus, when I view it from this fair garden under the shadow of the vines in my back yard,"* he wrote. *"But if I climb some great mountain and look out over these wide lands, you know very well what I see: thieves on the road, and pirates on the seas. In addition, in the amphitheaters people murder each other to please the crowds, and under each roof I see misery and selfishness. It is really a bad world, Donatus, and incredibly bad world. YET, in the midst of it all, I have found a quiet and holy people. They have discovered a joy which is a thousand times better than any pleasure of the sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. These people, Donatus, are Christians, and I am one of them."*

Cyprian wrote that because he knew that in the community nature of the Christian faith, we are not only enabled to better strive to enter into - and live in - relationship with Jesus, we are also better enabled to experience joy and happiness. We see this in the gospel passage when Jesus told His disciples *"Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Blessed are the pure in heart, for*

*they will see God. Blessed are the peacemakers, for they will be called sons of God.”* For it is only when we strive to enter into - and live in - relationship with the followers of Jesus that we call the Church that we have the opportunity to put into practice the call to be “*merciful*” as we interact with others in situations where we have to choose mercy over cruelty. It is only when we strive to enter into - and live in - relationship with the followers of Jesus that we call the Church that we have the opportunity to be “*pure in heart*” in our interactions rather than be abusive. And it is only when we strive to enter into - and live in - relationship with the followers of Jesus that we call the Church that we can choose to be “*peacemakers*” rather than ‘peacebreakers’ in how we speak and act toward those walking with us in this journey.

For as the Apostle John wrote in his first epistle “*if anyone says, ‘I love God,’ yet hates his brother, he is a liar. For anyone who does not love his brother, whom he has seen, cannot love God, whom he has not seen.*” To find true joy and happiness, however, we need to do more than just individually strive to enter into - and live in - relationship with Jesus, and even strive to enter into - and live in - relationship with the followers of Jesus that we call ‘the Church.’

We also need to strive to enter into - and live in - relationship with those who are not yet followers of Jesus in such a way that they also become His followers. For while there is only one path that leads to people experiencing joy and happiness, and we need to travel that path in the company of people on that same journey in order to experience the fullness of the joy and happiness God wills to give us, we will not experience the absolute FULLNESS of joy and happiness if we stop at only seeking to have certain things happen IN and FOR us. That is because in the Great Commission we are ALSO called to seek to have certain things happen THROUGH us. And the reason for that is ‘Christian faith’ is not individualistic. It ties us not only to God but to others through God. And it broadens our horizons from our own interests to the interests of others, inviting us to not only love God “*with all our heart, soul, mind and strength,*” but to also love others as much as we love ourselves - offering to them the opportunity to experience the joy that we experience as we walk with God and fellow spiritual pilgrims.

We see this in a man who went to his pastor with a heavy heart. When they sat down, the man said “*I don't know what's wrong with my life. But the joy I felt when I first became a Christian is gone. I live a moral life. I attend worship. But I have lost the radiance that my faith in Christ used to have. What should I do? How can I recover joy?*” His pastor replied, “*Go to the store and buy a cart of groceries. Take that food to the address of a family I will give you, and once you have given them that gift, sit down with them, talk with them, and find out what other needs they have. Let them know that you are interested in them, and that you want to be their friend. And I guarantee that the radiance your faith once had will return.*” He said that because Jesus said “*if anyone would come after me, let him deny himself and take up his cross and follow me. For whoever would save his life will lose it, but whoever loses his life for my sake will find it.*” And it is only when we find our lives by losing them for Jesus and those whom He would like us to help become His followers that we experience the fullness of joy and complete happiness.

We see this in the gospel passage when Jesus told His disciples “*Blessed are those who are persecuted because of righteousness, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. Blessed are you when people insult you, persecute you and falsely say all kinds of evil against you.*” For it is only when we strive to enter - and live in - relationship not only with the followers of Jesus we call ‘the Church,’ but also those who are not yet followers of Jesus in such a way that they also become His followers, that we work with the angels who said “*I bring you good news of great joy.*” And it is only when we work with the angels to bring those around us “*good news of great joy*” by helping them enter into relationship with Jesus - even when it means being “*persecuted*” or “*insulted*” - that we are able to “*rejoice and be glad*” as God’s joy and happiness rises up within us as fully as it did for Jesus “*who for the joy set before him endured the cross.*”

So, if you want to “Be Happy”, celebrate Christmas in July today by making the decision to strive to enter into - and live in - relationship with Jesus Christ. Make the decision to strive to enter into - and live in - relationship with the followers of Jesus that we call ‘the Church.’ And make the decision to strive to enter - and live in - relationship with those who are not yet followers of Jesus in such a way that they also become His followers. For that is how you are able to “*rejoice and be glad*” in such a way that you not only experience “*reward in heaven*” one day, but also the fullness of joy and complete happiness in the here and now of this life. So make the decision today - and every day - to “Be Happy!”