How to Be Happy: Treasures on Earth on Ash Wednesday

“How your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly…” (Isa. 58).

How can you be healed spiritually this Lent? In 2003 it would have been hard to predict what was about to happen in professional British bicycle racing. Since 1908 British riders had won only one gold medal in the Olympic Games. In 110 years they had never won a single Tour de France. Their performance was so mediocre that some top manufacturers refused to sell them gear because they thought it would hurt sales if other pros saw them using it.¹

But that year they hired Dave Brailsford as a coach. He had a really simple philosophy. He reasoned that if you can just break down everything involved in riding a bike, and then if you could just make a 1% improvement in each relatively small thing, and you kept doing that, all those gains would end up making a significant impact on the team’s success.

So they got better seats, put alcohol on the tires for a better grip, wore electric shorts that kept their muscles at the optimum performance temperature. They even tried different kinds of massage gel. They learned the best way to wash their hands to prevent colds. They got the best pillow and mattress for each rider’s sleep.

These may seem like silly things but the results were spectacular. From 2007 to 2017 British cyclists won 178 world championships, 66 Olympic or Paralympic gold medals and captured 5 Tour de France victories.

Today we observe Ash Wednesday, the first day of the Season of Lent. What small change could you make to your daily life that would have a transformative spiritual effect in forty days? My mission tonight is to offer you a suggestion. The ancient prophet Isaiah writes, “Then your light shall break forth like the dawn, and your healing shall spring up quickly” (Isa. 58).

For two thousand years Christians have used the forty days before Easter to focus on spiritual growth. It is time to move more deeply into the life of God. For that reason I
love Lent. It gives me the chance to take on a spiritual discipline or focus that will change who I am for the better.

Usually on this day in church a priest will put ashes on our foreheads and say, “Remember that from dust thou art, to dust thou shalt return.” Ash Wednesday reminds us of our death, not out of some morbid preoccupation with our finitude, but in the recognition that nothing other than God will last forever. It is a reminder of just how precious the people, the experiences of this moment are. It is God’s way of saying “this is YOUR time!”

Jesus gives instructions about how to be transformed spiritually. He talks about giving money to the poor, prayer and fasting. He reminds us to be careful, not to ruin the power of our faith by using it for another purpose (for instance to impress others). He says, “whenever you pray, do not be like the hypocrites; for they love to pray... so that they may be seen by others” (Mt. 6). Jesus is not saying that you should keep your faith a secret, only that we should use our spirituality for its intended purpose.

The Greek word upokritai back then meant just what it does today – a hypocrite, someone without what we call integrity, someone whose actions don’t match what they say they believe. But the Greek word also had another meaning. It meant interpreter or actor.

We do this kind of acting all the time. We pretend to be something that we are not. We act as if we are competent, smart, desirable, successful, righteous, friendly, normal, perfect when we are not. So much of what we do comes out of this desire to control how others perceive us. So much of our life is simply pretending.

Instead of this acting, Jesus encourages us to be who we really are as children of God. He invites us to return to our true self, to that part of us that doesn’t have to be afraid about how others perceive us.

One important way that Jesus does this is by reminding us of a truth. He says that, “where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Mt. 6). Your treasure may be mansion in Pacific Heights, a prestigious career, a huge social media following, a perfect family, or being happy. Jesus teaches us to redirect our energies from a focus on accumulating physical things or social standing to spiritual well-being and wholeness.

There is a falsehood that nearly all of us live by much of the time. We talk and act as if our outward circumstances are what will really make us happy. We say that we will be happy after we make the varsity baseball team, or get accepted to a prestigious college,
pass the bar exam, make partner, receive our degree. We say that we’ll be happy after we retire. In doing this we wish our lives away. In particular we assume that success will make us happy.

The truth however is that we were not made to be satisfied by these things. Happiness does not come from outside in. It begins in our heart. It is only by being in harmony with God that we will ever feel whole. Hoping to derive joy out of success is like trying to put molasses in the gas tank of an automobile designed to run on petroleum fuel. We are made to run on God’s spirit, nothing else will be enough for us.

I have known people who are successful beyond all imagination – but mostly they are not any happier than others. Here is the secret. If happiness is defined as something that is only possible on the other side of success, we never really get there. As soon as we achieve that success it is almost instantly not enough because we are already longing for the next thing. The goal posts are always moving, the sales quotas are always being adjusted.

This approach to life teaches us to exist in a universe where joy is always put off and deferred. It is never present to us in the moment. And as a result it trains us to never be happy. So what can we do?

Happiness, or to be more precise, joy comes from being as fully in God as we can be in the present moment. The secret that no one tells you is that we can fall in love with God. If we can learn to pause and see, we can be in love with the one who is nearer to us than our very selves.

Prayer over time teaches me to come back into the presence of the holiness that is our only real hope. When I was a young person, I would have a transcendental experience of beauty in an art museum or in a Sierra sunset or in a great cathedral or in a connection with a friend. But the older I get, the more this kind of experience of God is with me through the whole day.

All this brings me back to what I promised at the beginning when I wondered if we can make a little 1% change that could transform us spiritually. Jesus teaches us to pray in secret. My suggestion to you for these forty days is to adopt a simple practice. Every day during this time pray to God. Every day thank God for three things you are grateful for, three new things that you noticed about how the spirit is alive in our world. You might even write them down in a kind of spiritual journal.
Do not store up your treasures on earth. Leave them behind as you journey inward into the heart of God. Let prayer, let gratitude change your life over the next forty days. I look forward to hearing about your spiritual adventures.

“For where your treasure is, there your heart will be also” (Mt. 6).

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