

But Are You Happy?  
Preacher: Rev. Lauren Lorincz  
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“But are you Happy?” Pilgrim Church UCC, October 30, 2016, Thirty-first Sunday in Ordinary Time/Reformation Sunday (Luke 19:1-10)

The great preacher Fred Craddock once shared that he was traveling through the airport in Atlanta and stopped at a large food court to grab some breakfast. He got something to eat and sat down to enjoy his rather rushed airport meal only to hear singing. Stopping to pay attention, he heard this amazing male voice, deep, resonant, and obviously well-trained singing “Laura’s Theme” from Dr. Zhivago and then “Come Thou Fount of Every Blessing.” Craddock was amazed and went up to the counter and said to the girl working, “Is that singing coming from over here?” And she responded that it’s just Albert in the kitchen. Craddock asked to speak to Albert and out comes this large, smiling man who just says, “Yes, sir?” Amazed, Craddock introduced himself and Albert introduced himself. Craddock said, “Albert, I want to thank you for the singing. It’s marvelous.”

“He said, ‘You know what I’m doing, don’t you?’

And Craddock said, ‘No. What are you doing?’

He said, ‘I’m auditioning.’

‘You’re auditioning?’

He said, ‘Yeah, as many folks go through here all the time, there’s bound to be one that’s going to come along and going to take me out of this kitchen.’”[1]

Sometimes the most amazing encounters happen when we stop the routine of what we had planned to do and we start paying attention to the moment we’re experiencing right now. Fred Craddock was in the midst of traveling, passing through the airport in Atlanta on his way from here to there just trying to grab a quick breakfast. When he heard that marvelous, amazing singing, he felt compelled to stop what he was doing and inquire about who had that beautiful voice. He had to tell that singer, who happened to just be Albert working in the kitchen, how much he loved hearing him. One can imagine that hearing from someone who noticed his gift and affirmed his gift may have just made Albert’s day! Being able to notice and affirm Albert’s gift probably made Fred Craddock’s day too! When Fred Craddock had time to reflect on this encounter he mused that there’s not five percent of the population of Atlanta as happy as that guy in the kitchen.

This story begs the question what do we miss when we don’t pause and pay attention? And what does happiness really look like? We may find that God breaks through in unexpected ways. We may find that happiness can be found in unexpected places and in unexpected people.

The story of Zacchaeus is a story about God breaking through in someone’s life, it’s a story about paying attention. And it also begs the question: what does happiness really look like? If Zacchaeus hadn’t been paying attention to Jesus and if Jesus hadn’t been paying attention to Zacchaeus this encounter we read about in Luke’s Gospel would have never happened! This story can perhaps best be summed up by the children’s song we learned at my UCC church growing up, which can still be recited from memory: “Zacchaeus was a wee little man, a wee

little man was he. He climbed up in the sycamore tree, for the Lord he wanted to see. And when our Savior passed that way he looked up in the tree. And he said, 'Zacchaeus, you come down! For I'm going to your house today. For I'm going to your house today!'"

We had hand motions and everything and the pinnacle moment was when we kids got to yell, "Zacchaeus, you come down!" Maybe that is the pinnacle moment of our story, and not just the children's song we would sing with glee at my church growing up. Jesus doesn't just pass Zacchaeus by as he's up in that sycamore tree. Zacchaeus doesn't pass up the chance to get a better look at Jesus by climbing that sycamore tree. Instead Jesus beckons him to come down so that Jesus can stay at his home even if others are going to be grumbling critics about Jesus being the guest of a sinner.

We talked about tax collectors last Sunday when we heard the story of the Pharisee and the tax collector in the Temple. Tax collectors were almost universally despised, remember because they took a little bit (or a lot) off the top when they collected tolls, market duties, sales tax, income tax, property tax, and inheritance tax. They made a living by overcharging people, and some saw them as Roman collaborators. So when we encounter Zacchaeus, we should be paying attention to Luke saying that Zacchaeus is the chief tax collector and he was rich! That's like saying there's tax collectors and then there's that powerful and super corrupt chief tax collector Zacchaeus who might as well be Scrooge McDuck swimming in his pool of gold coins.

Yet Zacchaeus is this little guy who just wants to see who Jesus is, and he climbs up that sycamore tree when he figures out what path Jesus will take walking through the city of Jericho. After they encounter each other Zacchaeus repents, he turns around and turns back to God. Zacchaeus promises to give half of his possessions to the poor and to repay those he's defrauded four times what he took from them in the first place. Jesus responds by saying, "Today salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham. For the Son of Man came to seek out and to save the lost."<sup>[2]</sup> You want a summary of the Gospel of Luke? Jesus came to seek out and to save the lost! The end.

There's a lot of people out there in our world today like Zacchaeus. On the outside they have it all because maybe they have a good job or had a good job and they're wealthy. Life looks pretty great with fancy homes and cars and stuff in general. But on the inside they may feel empty and suffering and alone and afraid and lost. Money does not buy happiness, not true and lasting happiness. It never has and it never will. Look at Zacchaeus who seemed to have it all, but was he really happy?

Years ago by now I read this great book by NPR's Eric Weiner called *The Geography of Bliss: One Grump's Search for the Happiest Places in the World*. Weiner explores the concept of happiness in the Netherlands, Switzerland, Bhutan, Qatar, Iceland, Moldova, Thailand, Great Britain, India, and America. It's truly fascinating to hear peoples' perspectives on happiness from all around the world. Weiner observes that the Swiss are happy because they go to great lengths not to provoke envy in anyone else. Many believe that envy is the great enemy of happiness and for the Swiss the worst thing you can be is a flashy winner.

Weiner encounters a sign in Bhutan that reads, "When the last tree is cut, when the last river is emptied, when the last fish is caught, only then will man realize that he cannot eat money." He has this hilarious experience where a leader in Bhutan gently scolds him for writing in his notebook all the time and the leader tells this educated, forthright NPR reporter that he needs to experience, really experience life. Put down your notebook and live a little! Meanwhile he's frantically writing every word, including you are always writing, you need to experience . . . when he looks up and sheepishly puts his notebook away and begins to have a normal

conversation with the person right in front of him. There's that concept again of needing to sometimes put things away in order to not miss important encounters in our lives!

Weiner relates that in Iceland there are no strangers really. The formal Icelandic greeting translates as "come happy" and when Icelanders part they say "go happy." Happiness is wished upon one another day in and day out. When Weiner wants to experience happiness in Great Britain he goes to a pub, obviously. While there he observes, "Even in the inebriated atmosphere of the pub, the British remain economical with their emotions. Personal information is doled out judiciously, like premium chocolate or fine wine . . . so when a Brit opens up, exposes their wounds, where it hurts, this is more valuable, more meaningful, than when an American does it." Are you intrigued about what he learned concerning happiness in America? Well then you need to read the book!

It's a truly fascinating subject—what does happiness look like all around the world, what do different cultures value? What can we learn from other nations and other religions when it comes to living the good life? At the end of his journey, Weiner tries to sum up what he learned as he explored the geography of bliss. This may be a spoiler though I'll share it anyway. He summarizes by writing: "Only a fool or philosopher would make sweeping generalizations about the nature of happiness. I am no philosopher, so here goes: Money matters, but less than we think and not in the way that we think. Family is important. So are friends. Envy is toxic. So is excessive thinking. Beaches are optional. Trust is not. Neither is gratitude." [3]

Here's the thing, if we want to be relatively happy it ends up that trust and gratitude are both necessary. Family and friends are really important. Envy and excessive thinking are actually toxic. And money matters, but far less than we think.

If Jesus were to look at this list of what makes people generally happy in various cultures throughout the world he may very well agree. Because we certainly know that Zacchaeus may have looked like he had it all on the outside, but his life of isolation and terrible business practices certainly didn't win him many friends. One can't help but wonder how happy he truly was as he climbed up that sycamore tree for the Lord he wanted to see. One can't help but wonder how lost he probably felt inside. And how it must have felt when he heard, "Zacchaeus, you come down! For I'm going to your house today. For I'm going to your house today!" So thanks be to God for continually seeking out and saving the lost, especially when that's us. Amen.

[1] Fred B. Craddock, edited by Mike Graves and Richard F. Ward, Craddock Stories, 122-123.

[2] Luke 19:9-10, NRSV.

[3] Quotes taken from Eric Weiner, The Geography of Bliss: One Grump's Search for the Happiest Places in the World.