

If You're Happy and You Know It©

Psalm 1

May 17, 2016

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A couple of weeks ago, I was blessed beyond measure, to be in Alabama at a very meaningful event called *The Academy for Spiritual Formation*. The academy is a program of The Upper Room Ministries that is over 30 years old. It is designed to help both clergy and laity to grow deeper in their own spirituality for the sake of others. They have 5-Day Academies and 2 Year Academies. I have always had a desire to do the 2-year as I know that it deepens ones faith and knowledge.

The one I went to recently was a 5-Day Academy and it focused on Praying and Living the Psalms. I have never looked at the Psalms in quite the same way as I do now, and I'm eager to share with you over time.

Today's lectionary reading just happens to be from Psalm 1. How appropriate is that? Psalm 1 and 2 are said to be the introduction to the Psalter. That is what the entire 150 psalms are called ... The Psalter. As anyone who has read the psalms knows, there are several different types of psalms in the 5 books.

We read psalms of thanksgiving, psalms of lament, psalms of praise, psalms of trust, psalms that deal with enemies. Over the summer, I plan to preach about these different types of psalms with the hope of helping you to become familiar with them and to perhaps use the psalms as your prayer book.

As we look at Psalm 1, we see that the very first word in the entire book of the Psalter is – Happy. (In some translations, the word is “blest” or “joyful” but in ours today, the New Revised Standard Version, which I really like, it is “Happy.”

I also like the way Eugene Peterson translates Psalm 1. Listen to this, from The Message:

How well God must like you—
 you don't hang out at Sin Saloon,
 you don't slink along Dead-End Road,
 you don't go to Smart-Mouth College.

²⁻³ Instead you thrill to God's Word,
 you chew on Scripture day and night.
 You're a tree replanted in Eden,
 bearing fresh fruit every month,
 Never dropping a leaf,
 always in blossom.

⁴⁻⁵ You're not at all like the wicked,
 who are mere windblown dust—
 Without defense in court,
 unfit company for innocent people.

⁶ God charts the road you take.
 The road *they* take is Skid Row.

I couldn't help but think of that little song – “If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands! If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands! If you're happy and you know it, then your face will surely show it. If you're happy and you know it, clap your hands.”

I'm pretty sure that song wasn't written by the psalmist, but it could have been! There is so much in the psalms that give us command to clap our hands in praise. We even sing about the trees of the field clapping their hands.

This first psalm doesn't begin with telling us what we should DO to be happy. Instead, it begins by telling us what we should NOT do, if we want to be happy. We should not walk in the way of the wicked. We should not stand with sinners, or sit among the scoffers.

That's a recipe for never being happy, because if we mingle with them we will become like them.

But who are they – these wicked people?

Sister Irene Nowell, who is an Old Testament scholar and a Catholic nun in the Benedictine community of Mount Saint Schloastica in Atchison, Kansas, wrote a book I just read titled: *Pleading, Cursing, Praising ... Conversing with God through the Psalms*.

Sister Irene writes: “The people we are warned to avoid if we want to be happy are not named as murderers or adulterers, embezzlers or muggers. They are the naysayers among us. They are the proud and haughty who act with arrogance.

They have closed all the doors and are unable to be open to anything new that God might have to offer. Saint Benedict calls these people “murmurers” or “grumblers.” Psalm 1 warns us that if we would be happy we should avoid getting drawn into a murmuring session ...”

We've all been subject to those murmuring sessions at one time or another, in our lives, haven't we? We end up with a group of people having coffee somewhere and the next

thing you know, someone is griping about someone else. The negativity quickly seems to spread like a virus and pretty soon, it seems everyone is negative and grumbling.

I've seen that happen so often when it comes to talking about the government, or the president, or politics, or the denomination, or the Church and its leadership.

But, if you've sat very long with the murmurers and grumblers, once you walk away, don't you feel a heavy weight, a very down feeling? I know I do.

What the psalmist is saying here is that this is not the way of happy people. Instead the person who is truly happy meditates, studies, ponders, and delights in God's law (the torah). The Scripture is God's word to us, God's teaching. It is the way God speaks to us day after day.

The 5 books of the Psalms – seem to be an imitation of the Pentateuch – the first 5 books of the Bible - called the torah).

So, the psalms are like a "mini-Pentateuch," God's law in a pocket version, so we can delight in and ponder it night and day. We should be memorizing pieces of the psalms; we should be murmuring God's word day and night so that, as Sister Irene's High School English teacher said: "The Psalms just soak into your bones."

Or, another thoughtful saint – Demetrius Dumm – "uses the image of a Crock-pot, which tenderizes even the toughest cuts of meat. He observes that "many a tough-willed monastic has been made docile and gentle before God by faithful praying of the psalms." (Demetrius Dumm, *Cherish Christ Above all*, (Mahwah, NJ: Paulist, 1996; reprinted by St. Vincents Archabbey, Latrobe, PS), 125

Our translation says of those who are happy:

"They are like trees
 planted by streams of water,
 which yield their fruit in its season,
 and their leaves do not wither.
 In all that they do, they prosper."

There are so many who have gone before us: the disciples, of course, and those in the early churches who were persecuted or lost their lives because of faith ... trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit.

But there are others too. I've been reading about Dietrich Bonhoeffer, author of *The Cost of Discipleship*. He said in this book that to claim God's grace in the cross of Christ but to not live your life in faithful discipleship makes Jesus' suffering, and the cross, to be "cheap grace."

Bonheoffer was in prison in Germany for speaking out and leading the resistance against the Nazi's as they forced the nation to become a Nazi Church, with loyalty only to Hitler, doing away with the Old Testament as if it had no value. Of course, the Old Testament was full of stories of Jews, which the Nazi's were determined to get rid of.

In April, 1945, just before World War II ended, the Nazi's executed Dietrich Bonheoffer. He certainly knew, first hand, the cost of discipleship.

He wrote: "It is grace to know God's commands. They release us from self-made plans and conflicts. They make our steps certain and our way joyful. God gives his commands in order that we may fulfill them, and "his commandments are not burdensome" (1 John 5:3) for those who have found all salvation in Jesus Christ."

In other words, it is a joy to follow and obey the commands of Christ, our Lord for those of us who love him.

Saint Benedict is another, who wrote: "Listen with the ear of your heart." (RB Prol1). It is also the beginning of the Jewish daily prayer, called the Shema: "Shema, Y'sriel, Adoni, Eloheinu." "Hear, O Israel: the Lord is our God, the Lord alone. You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your might" (Deut 6:4-5).

The psalms demand of us careful attention. The listening they require must be constant and tuned to many voices: the voice of God, the voice of Christ, and the voices of all humankind."

In the psalms we can also hear our own voices – as we praise and give thanks, as we lament in deep grief, as we are angry because of enemies out to hurt us. As we join our communal voices in hymns and praise.

But the first voice to hear is God's voice to us. Sometimes challenging and sometimes comforting, sometimes the still, small sound of silence, and sometimes the roar of the devouring fire.

The second voice, as Christians, is to hear the voice of Christ. The Psalter was the prayer book of Jesus. When we pray the psalms we join our voices to his. St. Augustine emphasized the presence of Christ in the psalms, not only as head, but also in all the members of his body, especially the poor and suffering.

We hear human voices – the voices crying out throughout the world. These prayers are very human!

And so we are introduced to the psalms. I invite you, in the next couple of weeks, to turn to the psalms daily. Find a quiet space and read. And then be quiet and think –

meditate on what it's saying to you. If it seems rather odd to talk about enemies, put something that is bothering you in that place.

The psalms are full of our emotions. They are very real experiences – things we all experience in some way.

But don't forget – the first thing we learn from the psalms is how to be truly happy. Follow the road that the saints – the righteous – took. It may be costly; it may mean suffering; it may be hard. But it is the road to true happiness.

And by all means - stay away from Sin Saloon, Dead End Road and Smart Mouth College, whatever you do.

If you're happy and you know it, praise the Lord!

Let us pray ...

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