

4th Sunday in Ordinary Time

February 3, 2008

Imagine a drug that causes you to live eight or nine years longer, make \$15,000 more a year and be less likely to get divorced. "Happiness seems to be that drug," according to Martin Seligman a PhD psychologist who researches and writes about happiness. If we're miserable, can we make up our mind just to be happy as easily as if we were to take a pill? To some extent we can. Studies on twins say that about 50% of our happy or unhappy moods is genetic. About 10 % depends on depressing life circumstances such as being extremely poor, gravely ill or losing a loved one. The other 40 % we can control and is influenced by what we do to make ourselves happy. We just have to be careful not to pin our hopes for happiness on things like perfect health, lots of money, and good looks, which bring only a tad greater happiness than those less blessed. True happiness flows from deeper values such as engagement with family, work or a passionate pursuit, and finding meaning from some higher purpose. Does that sound like getting out of ourselves? Sitting around feeling sorry for ourselves just won't do it.

Four ideas that I think are very helpful for increasing happiness are (1) Being active (such as exercise) or (2) putting on a happy face. I think when we smile or laugh it tricks our mind into thinking we're happy and we feel happier. (3) I've always preached that gratitude is the key to happiness. Psychologists are suggesting that people keep a gratitude journal, writing down at the end of the day the things that happened that cheered them up. Experts say counting your blessings may be the single most helpful thing you can do for you happiness. (4) Doing good things for others can help too.

There are those times when a person needs professional help and/or medicine. There is that 50 % that is genetic where some types of depression seems to be inherited or that 10 % when a person is in a seriously difficult place in life. Self medication with alcohol or other forms of addiction only add to the problem. If you need the help, get it. There's no shame in that. A lot of depression is due to internal chemistry or external circumstances which a person can't handle on their own. For many of us the attitude we have toward life (seeing the glass as half full instead of half empty), the attitude of gratitude, of helping others, of getting out of ourselves, of surrounding ourselves with cheerful people or positive thoughts can help improve our own happiness quotient.

Then there's our faith which gives us hope. Jesus gives us the beatitudes, which form the introduction to his sermon on the mount. His sermon is three chapters long, by the way, which we will totally miss. We'll hear the very last part in June after the Lent and Easter cycle. Jesus is talking to the common people of his day, people who were living close to the edge, people under the rule of Rome, people surviving day to day. He is letting them know life's troubles and difficulties will some day be reversed for those who open their hearts to the Kingdom he came to announce. The Greek word (and Greek is the language in which we find the original form of the gospel we have) the Greek word that begins each beatitude is "μα??????" The word means "happy" in an ordinary sense, but it also means one who is especially happy or favored or

fortunate. That's why it is translated "blessed."

Reflecting on the beatitudes, it makes perfect sense to me to say that those who are poor in spirit, i.e., who are satisfied with simple things in life, those who are merciful, those who are clean of heart will be happy or blessed. It wouldn't make much sense at all to say "happy" or "blessed" are those who mourn, those who hunger or thirst for righteousness, those who are persecuted unless somehow God would remove their sadness and let them share in his joy. In that lies our faith and hope. The thing that keeps me going is to keep believing that God can bring something good out of everything. Without the happiness and hope that thought gives me, I would have given up in despair many times. Similarly I have often heard the Archbishop say during difficult times: "God's in this somewhere." I don't always see how God can make things better; I just believe he can. That's because I believe in the resurrection. If God could turn Good Friday into Easter Sunday, he can turn our sadness, our losses, our crises, our sicknesses into a blessing for us. That is the hope God gives us.

The Holy Father just finished his second encyclical: On Christian Hope. He says: our great hope – faith in Jesus – can sustain people during the roughest of times. He goes on: we need God otherwise we remain without hope. That's what brings us to Mass every week. We celebrate Jesus' death and resurrection, his body given for us and to us, and his resurrection that gives us hope that even death cannot defeat us if we stay in union with him. Blessed are we who believe in him and blessed are you for being here today. Amen.

1st Sunday in Lent

February 10, 2008

INTRODUCTION: Today's first reading tells us the story of the creation of our first parents, their temptation and their fall from grace. This does not pretend to be a documentary of what happened one or two million years earlier. It is more like a parable that attempts to understand the problem of evil. God created the human race to be happy and to share in his grace and friendship. This is indicated by the Garden of Eden. This story of Adam and Eve tells us the source of evil is our decision to give in to temptation, to not trust, to make our own rules, to use the free will which God gave us to say "no" to God. The story shows us that we bring suffering upon ourselves as a result. Paul, in the second reading, reflects on this sinful tendency in all of us. But his emphasis is on the good news that Christ can save us from sin.

HOMILY:

A teacher asked her little children in religion class to draw a picture of their favorite bible story. One small boy drew the picture of an elderly gentleman, elegantly dressed, driving a big convertible. In the back of the car were two people, hardly dressed at all. The teacher thought it was an interesting picture and asked what it meant. The young artist was surprised the teacher had to ask, but he explained that was God driving Adam and Eve out of the Garden of Eden.

Today's gospel, where Jesus refuses to give in to temptation, is contrasted with the first reading where Adam and Eve did give in. We'll never know precisely what their sin was, but it doesn't matter. Ultimately their sin was no different than ours, a decision not to trust God when he tells us to do or not to do something. Even though Adam and Eve gave in to sin, we can't be too condemning of them. We might not have done any better ourselves.

Temptation is always a matter of thinking we can be happier without God's direction or help. The grace to resist temptation is always available to us, but we don't always use it. All of us are tempted. Even Jesus himself was tempted. Did you notice how Jesus always answered the devil with a quote from scripture. It shows how knowing scripture can be a real help to resist temptation. Then again, the devil quoted scripture too, so we have to know it well.

We always begin the season of Lent with Jesus in the desert. I want to say a word or two about the desert. Jesus was sent there by the Holy Spirit right after his baptism. It was a time to reflect and pray, a time of transition from the workshop to his work of teaching and healing. We all need to go into the desert from time to time. Sometimes the Holy Spirit takes us there by denying to us for a time the joys and consolations that we would like our religion to bring us. Sometimes life itself takes us into a desert, with the loss of a loved one or a job or our health, or a feeling that we've lost our purpose. Our faith is really tested during such times. That's when we wonder whether God still loves us, whether God is still with us. Lent is a kind of little desert as we are encouraged to temporarily back away from a few of life's pleasures, pleasures that distract us from reflecting on the more serious side of life. Often I minister to people who are dying. It's not unusual for someone to say to me: "I never thought this would happen to me." I guess they never thought about what was ahead for all of us. Life could be over for any of us tomorrow. The important thing to know is that eternal life is ahead for us too if we remain faithful to our Lord and follow him. Jesus told us he would prepare a place for us in his Father's home and he will never reject anyone who comes to him. But we do have the freedom to turn away from him by not following the way he has shown us. Indeed, these are profound thoughts, but that's what Lent is for, to think and pray about these things.

2nd Sunday in Lent

February 17, 2008

INTRODUCTION: Sin is a reality of life. We heard about that last week with the story of Adam and Eve. Grace, too, is a reality of life. St. Paul tells us God wants all people to be saved, which implies he will give each person sufficient grace for salvation. God's ways are often hidden from us, but his saving work became visible and a part of the history of the world with his call to Abraham. Abraham came from Sumer, a settlement near modern day Kuwait. He and his family migrated to Haran, a city in the northern part of Syria, near Turkey. Eventually he heard God's call to leave his kinfolk behind and move to the land of Canaan, modern day Israel. He left

behind a prosperous commercial area to settle in a land that was still relatively primitive and undeveloped. Abraham made the long and difficult journey at the tender age of 75 along with his wife, Sarah, who was 10 years younger. God was telling them, not only to pack up and move to an unknown territory, but to start a family there as well! It was a pure act of faith on the part of Abraham to follow God's call and to believe in the blessings God kept promising him, promises we hear in today's first reading.

HOMILY: We sang in the psalm refrain "Lord let your mercy be on us as we place our trust in you." Trust, or faith, in God is one of the most basic elements of our relationship with him. Without trust, our relationship will go nowhere. In the stories in the Bible about Abraham we see a man who trusted God totally. Peter, James and John get a boost to their faith on Mount Tabor with Jesus when they experienced Jesus' transfiguration.

I am sure many people here have climbed a mountain or high hill and experienced the presence and grandeur of God, maybe not as dramatic as the three apostles did in the transfiguration, but God's presence could be felt none the less. One of the most memorable days I ever had was the day I climbed Mt. Sinai, a mountain in the southern portion of Sinai Peninsula where tradition has it that God gave Moses the Ten Commandments. It is part of a chain of rugged, reddish colored granite mountains that rise high into the air. Mt. Sinai itself is 7500 feet high. The view of the stark and arid mountains surrounding Mt. Sinai is spectacular.

If you've never climbed a real mountain, I'm sure you've climbed many mountains figuratively: mountains of ignorance to become educated, mountains of fear to discover new strength and courage, mountains of hurt and sickness to find healing, mountains of pride to discover we are not the center of the universe. In conquering such everyday heights, we discover the God who never leaves us. Peter, James and John on Mt. Tabor discovered the God that was hidden within Jesus who was always with them.

The Church continues to encourage us to discover God's invisible presence with each of us through its many ministries. This Sunday we make an appeal for several of the ministries that are vital to thousands of people within our own Archdiocese. These ministries are worthy of our support and in need of it. Such ministries are the Athenaeum and the education it offers to prospective priests, deacons and lay ministers; St. Rita's School for the Deaf, Catholic Social Services which helps with a great variety of social needs from adoption to care for the elderly, chaplains in hospitals and prisons and on college campuses and last but not least, retired priests. We are asking for your support today for all of these ministries which are grouped together under the name of the Catholic Ministries Appeal.

The name Catholic Ministries Appeal is now being used because the focus of the appeal has been totally directed only to these ministries not to any other programs or projects. Our goal is \$15,000, the same as it was last year for the Archdiocesan Appeal. We made it last year. I'm sure we can do it again.

You will find an envelope in the pew which I ask you to fill out. You can make a pledge or an

outright gift. If you make a gift through a check, please make it out to St. Boniface Church. Whether you are giving cash, a check or using your charge card, please drop the envelope in the collection or send it in the mail to St. Boniface. You can take it home and bring it next week if that's convenient.

Are you wondering how much to give in order to help us reach our goal? My suggestion would be to give about two and a half times what you give as a donation on an average Sunday. Thus if you give \$20 a week (or \$80 a month as some people choose to do), then donate \$50 to this special appeal (that's 2 ½ times \$20). If you give \$40 a week, then donate \$100 (2 ½ times 40). I think we'll make our goal that way. Some people cannot donate any more than they now are giving, so if you can do better than 2 ½ times your Sunday donation that will help make up for those who cannot give so much. Just remember to make checks out to St. Boniface Church and whether you make a pledge, give cash, check or use a charge card, return the envelope to us.