

Psalm 1  
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On Faith, Love and Justice

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1 Happy are those who do not follow the advice of the wicked, or take the path that sinners tread, or sit in the seat of scoffers; 2 but their delight is in the law of the Lord, and on his law they meditate day and night. 3 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. 4 The wicked are not so, but are like chaff that the wind drives away. 5 Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment, nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous; 6 for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous, but the way of the wicked will perish.

Happy Mother's Day!

“Happy are they...”

“Happy” is the first word in all of the Book of Psalms. How wonderful is that!

Today I'd like to talk about happiness, faith, love, and justice.

First, we'll all be relieved to know that modern research has confirmed what the psalmist wrote 2500 years ago. There **is** a positive link between faith and happiness.

Medical and social science studies have borne it out for decades and they continue. *Time Magazine* cited a 2015 survey by researchers at the London School of Economics and the Erasmus University Medical Center in the Netherlands: “participating in a religious organization was the only social activity associated with sustained happiness—even more than volunteering for a charity, taking educational courses or participating in a political or community organization.”

The psalmist was also right that happy people prosper—a better translation: they thrive.

And they are more productive.

According to Shawn Achor's delightful 2011 TEDex talk on the subject, being happy makes the brain work better, raising levels of intelligence, creativity and energy. That may be why in the last 10-15 years, the study of happiness –also called positive psychology—has been booming.

Studies in neuro-plasticity— which is the brain's ability to reorganize itself by forming new neural connections throughout life—have shown that we can rewire our brains in all kinds of ways, including to be happier. Shawn Achor outlined a simple daily regimen including exercise, meditation, recording gratitudes, and performing random acts of kindness that have been shown positively to transform the brain.

It's all well and good for us to remold our minds for our purposes, but Hebrew scholar Professor J. Clinton McCann, reminds us that "for the psalmist, the primary **subject** is not the human being, but rather God....In short, and in contrast to what much of our society tells us," McCann wrote, "happiness is not about doing what we want to do. Rather happiness is about doing what *God* wants done." (commentary on Workingpreacher.org)

How do we know what God wants done? By studying God's teaching ("law")—*torah*—the psalmist wrote, and by meditating on it to discern God's will. That's what Jesus did. That's how he came to formulate the Great Commandment: 'love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind ... And ... your neighbor as yourself'".

As for the wicked, McCann contends that the psalm "does not portray a retribitional system whereby God punishes 'the wicked.' Rather by their own choice 'the wicked' separate themselves from God."

McCann's short, penetrating commentary on the first psalm continues, "Psalm 1 invites us to a choice—our choice....Will we choose God's way, which promises life? Or will we choose to go our own way, which promises death?"

How will we know if we are choosing God's way? McCann says the key words in Psalm 1 are *justice* (translated judgment in the NRSV) and *righteousness*. Those two words recur so frequently in the psalms that some scholars declare they are "the heart of the psalter."

McCann concludes: "If there is a law involved, it is the law of love (Romans 13:8-10). The promise of Psalm 1, reinforced by Jesus and Paul, is that the God-directed and neighbor-oriented way is the most rewarding and happiness-producing life possible. The choice is ours."

Faith and happiness versus wickedness and death: it sounds like an overly-dramatic contrast. But last week, I saw how real that choice can be on a visit to Thistle Farms in Nashville.

Thistle Farms is a manifestation of God's way of justice, founded by the Rev. Becca Stevens, Episcopal Chaplain at Vanderbilt. It is a social-justice ministry, a non-profit enterprise that gives women a way out of sex trafficking and addiction. Each woman is granted two years of sanctuary—free room and board, in attractive housing with other women in the program. In addition each has free medical, dental and psychiatric care and rehab including required twelve-step meetings. All of this provides the space and time and specific therapies for them to heal in body, mind and spirit. Social interaction and employment experience come, too, with their work making and selling Thistle Farms' body-care products ([thistlefarms.org](http://thistlefarms.org))

Think about it. Women for whom no one has ever truly cared, are caring for each other. And—through the Thistle Farm products—they are caring for thousands of people whom they will never see. Every thing they produce for sale bears the motto: “Love Heals”.

Now over twenty years in operation, Thistle Farms has inspired the creation of forty sister organizations around the country—and counting. So inspiring, that they sponsor bi-monthly workshops for people seeking information. It is the model for our partner Pastor Alika Galloway’s Northside Healing Space, in whose development St. John’s hopes to play a part. Our part will be revealed as the ministry grows and we are invited.

That’s why Cathy Bouggy and Clara Sanders Marcus and I went with Pastor Alika to a workshop—along with about 70 others.

We met women, graduates of the program, whose lives have been transformed from unimaginable suffering and terror to happiness, faith, and productivity.

Let us be clear: the women did not choose life on the streets. Every one of them has been raped. Victims of sexual abuse at early ages, many of them never knew any other way of survival than selling their bodies. Drug addiction quickly followed to numb the pain.

The choice to leave that life would seem to be a no brainer. But if every gift you were offered came at a huge, hidden price, if you have no experience of grace freely given, you have no reason to trust **anyone**. And **trust** is one of the gifts that the brings to participants.

It takes extraordinary courage to give up the only life you have ever known, to surrender the illusion of freedom, to join an intentional community with strangers, and submit to the disciplines of rehabilitation. Not all who begin are able to stay the course.

Each story we heard from a survivor was wrenchingly moving and deeply hopeful. In this Easter season, we were blessed to see the truth of resurrection in people’s lives.

One woman completing the two years proudly told us she knew how to make every single product and was being promoted to supervisor. At 37, she has her first legal job ever. She said that she could have gotten clean on her own, but without the activities they share in the Thistle Farm community she would not have wanted to live.

In closing, I want to circle back to neuro-plasticity. While it’s wonderful that we can intentionally retrain our brains in a variety of ways, it’s vital to recognize how easily our brains can be re-formed unintentionally by what we read, what we listen to, and

by the company we keep. Our brains, our emotions and our behavior are certainly affected by that. The psalmist knew that, too!

It is heart breaking, for instance, to see how quickly the level of public discourse has descended in this country. It's because anger and disrespect foster anger and disrespect. On the other hand, kindness and respect foster kindness and respect.

I don't know if my own brain was reformed, but I am certain that my return to faith about 25 years ago transformed my values and my behavior. Being part of Episcopal parishes like this one—as a lay person and as clergy—slowly shifted my focus from materialism and "success" to one love, sharing and service.

We are stewards of many things in life, nothing more precious than the care of our souls. Psalm 1 invites us to consider carefully how we do that.

Think for a moment about the being for whom you feel most responsible, most protective, whom you treat most tenderly: a child, a pet, a beloved, a vulnerable adult?

What kinds of energy and influences would you shield that being from?

Please hear me when I ask you to do the same for yourself: translate that tender, loving **protection** to the care for your own soul.

Love of God and love of neighbor, and work in community for justice are the keys to health and to sustained happiness. Nurturing that love by seeking God's will is your choice and mine to make.