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"Faith and happiness" (1 Peter 1:6-9)

Today, through the words of the Scripture from 1 Peter chapter 1, I want to have an opportunity to reflect on the grace of the Lord. The title of today's sermon is Faith and Happiness. One of the most basic essences of human beings is the fact that they all want to be happy and content. We all have different life experiences, personal background, and circumstances in life. But one commonality we all have as a human being is to strive for happiness. We all want to be happy.

The English word "happiness" is originated from the word “HAP” and it has the same etymology – language group as the word “happen.” The word “happiness” was first used in the 13century in England with the word “Hap.” So “happiness” is the situation or state of mind in which something pleasant happens to a person and the person becomes satisfied and joyful as a result. Therefore, linguistically speaking, only something good and pleasant has to happen for one to experience happiness.

In today’s text, however, St. Peter offers us a very different way for us to experience happiness and joy. What is more interesting is the fact that, for us, our happiness can be experienced even amid “grief” and “trials.” There is an unspeakable joy and gladness in the midst of tribulation and suffering. Even if good things don’t happen to us, we can experience happiness and joy. It is certainly a concept of happiness that can be understood as absurd in the eyes of the world.

How can we be happy when nothing good happens to us? Peter, in the words of today's text, explains this way. In verses 8 and 9, Peter said, “you have not seen Jesus, but you love him. Even though you do not see him now, you believe in him and are filled with an inexpressible and glorious joy, for you are receiving the salvation of your souls through your faith.”

In our daily living, carnal – physical activities are very important – what we eat, how we dress, sleep and work – these are all important. However, for everyone, especially for believers, the salvation of souls has more important meaning and implications. In order for us to have a healthy life, physically and mentally, our soul, our spirit, has to be in the right place. In order for us to experience the great love of the Lord, we have to continue our relationship with Christ.

According to biblical scholars, the book of Peter is believed to have been written in the early AD 60s. The main purpose for the book of Peter is to encourage the Jewish Christians in diaspora – those who were living in various parts of the Roman Empire at that time and to help them strengthen their faith in Jesus.

When we study the book of Peter, we see a theme that continuously flows throughout the book. The theme is this: "Keep the faith in the midst of tribulation and difficulty. Look to the Lord and trust his mercy – the Lord who suffered death but who rose from it so that we can live a life of joy and gratitude. Persevere through tribulations and trials, having faith in Jesus and be joyful and be grateful because we are saved by the grace of the Lord.”

Seeing this, some scholars say that the book of Peter may have been written not in the early AD 60s, but a few years later, in AD 64. The reason for this is that the massive and severe persecution of Christians did not began until 64 AD. If we look at history, there was a big fire in Rome in 64 AD. The fire continued for 5 days, and Rome was almost in ruins. The cause of the fire is not exactly known. But one theory is that Nero, the emperor of Rome at the time, set the fire himself and placed the blame on Christians to stop the rapid growth of Christianity.

Whether this is true or not has not been historically revealed. But one thing is clear. The massive scale of persecution of Christianity was started by Romans after the fire in 64 AD. And the persecution was so harsh and terrible as we know. In fact, until 64 AD, Christians could preach the gospel and freely built churches throughout the Roman empire. Christians faced difficulties and persecutions as they preached the gospel, but they were all local problems. Until 64 AD, Christians had freedom to express their faith and evangelize to people.

I know many of you have visited Italy and have been to Colosseum – amphitheater – in Rome. It is a huge and spacious place. The sad history of Colosseum is that Romans locked Christians up underground and used them as items for their own fun and entertainment. The Romans dragged out Christians into the amphitheater, forced them to fight against gladiators, and have them killed. They threw Christians into lions and watched them die in the Colosseum. Romans did this kind of things and used Christians for their enjoyment. In the midst of these severe persecutions, many Christians fled the Roman government, developed underground cities, and lived there. This persecution of Christianity continued for 250 years and ended when Emperor Constantinople established Christianity as the state religion of the Roman Empire.

I wonder if this is what Peter refers to in today's text, in verse 6, as "trials and suffering." The “trials and suffering" here are different from the trials and worries that arise in our lives now. Their worries and suffering are not about what to eat or wear today, but whether they can live today, “after this night, will I be able to face a new day tomorrow?” “Can my family make it safely today?” When St. Peter said, “trials and suffering,” this was what he meant. Yet, even in such situations, Peter was urging believers to look to Jesus and rejoice in His grace.

As modern-day believers, we too have "trials and suffering.” It may not be compared to the kind of trials that the early Christians suffered but we have our own challenges and trials. In that sense, the words of St. Peter in today's text are also important for all of us. And the lesson is that when we encounter life's worries and difficulties, we should not be frustrated or discouraged, but should look to Jesus Christ and rejoice in His grace.

Then, this becomes our question. Can we rejoice and be happy in the midst of life’s trials and suffering? I am sure that this is a question that we often ask ourselves and sometimes is asked of us by non-Christians. Will having faith in Christ really make me happy?

When I was serving with the United Methodist denomination’s national mission board, I had a privilege to travel several times to Calcutta, India, to visit Missionaries of Charity, the agency started by Mather Teresa. The purpose of my visits was to develop a partnership between Missionaries of Charity and the Global Ministries of the United Methodist Church to serve poor people in Southeast Asia.

During one of my visits, I had an opportunity to see the slums of Calcutta where the Missionaries of Charity has its mission work. There, I saw poverty that I have never seen before in my life. It was poverty that no human words can express. I had never seen the severity of poverty I saw in the slums of Calcutta anywhere else in Southeast Asia or Africa.

But, you see, there, I also saw another surprising scene. The Missionaries of Charity has many people from various parts of the world, coming to volunteer to serve. And, among them are so many young people. These young people go to the slums every day to provide food, play with children, and take care of the sick in the medical clinic. They also had a bathing ministry where they washed people who cannot use their hands. I saw some people who had worms – maggots – on their wounds because no one took care of them at home.

Because Calcutta is hot and humid, the heat coming out of the roads is unbearable. The place is so dirty and had bad a noxius everywhere. All these make the place hard to even stay for 10 minutes. But all these young people were happy to be there all day long and taking care of these people.

I was told that Mother Teresa's most favorite activity is to wash/ bathe sick patients. Some of these people would have worms on their wounds. Mother Teresa, as she washed these people, she often said, "Jesus, today I met you through these people. I met you once, twice, three times...” As she washed people, Mother Teresa saw the face of Christ in each person.

For Mother Teresa and for many young people who were there, the slums of Calcutta have become a paradise to meet Jesus. From a human point of view, the slum was a cursed land, a hellish place, but for them, it is a land of happiness and a place to experience the grace of the risen Christ. In that hellish place, they were able to experience risen Christ which made them happy and joyful. When we have faith in Christ, we can rejoice and be grateful for the life we have now.

Hebrews 11:6 says, "'Unless we have faith, it is impossible for us to make God happy.” By saying this, the writer of Hebrews defines the faith this way: "Faith that believes God must exist and that God will reward those who seek him.” Through our faith, we can make God happy and when we make God happy, God will reward us, making us happy as well. When we make God happy, God sees our faith. And this is how believers can live a happy life. This must be how Mother Teresa lived and how all those young volunteers at the Missionaries of Charity are living happily today even in the slums of Calcutta. So for us, the way in which we can live a happy life is quite easy. All we have to do is to have faith in God.

If we look around, we can see that even in our present time, there are many miracles of faith taking place. Faith can create miracles in life. Faith in God can make our lives fuller and richer. That is a promise of God. Even Jesus himself said to us, “I came to give you life and life abundantly” in the Gospel of John chapter 10 verse 10. For this reason, the lesson for today is that we need to look at the state of our faith if we lack joy and happiness in our lives no matter the circumstance.

We are the people who can be happy according to our faith. When we please the Lord, The Lord will become our joy. When we believe in God and cling to Him even in the midst of our life’s challenges and difficulties, our Lord will rejoice and will lead us to joy. We can be happy as much as we believe. If we believe less, we will experience joy less , and if we believe more, we will experience a lot more. My prayer that this time of worship together be an opportunity for us to hear these words of God and experience God’s blessings as we boldly and confidently live out our faith in this coming week.