How Can You Be Happy
"Teacher what shall I do to inherit eternal life" (Luke 10)?

Do you ever wonder, "Is there more to life than this? Am I happy?"

1. The composer Philip Glass writes, "In a clear way we are bound to our culture. We understand the world because of the way we were taught to see... because that's what was installed... into our heads when we were very young. But it is possible to step out of that world."¹

This is good news because most often we inhabit a secular environment which assumes in one way or another that there is no god. The Canadian philosopher Charles Taylor writes about this in his book A Secular Age.² He explains that in earlier periods it was impossible not to believe in god. But in this place and time faith in God is only one view among many. This change in perspective does not arise out of any scientific discovery. It is a cultural change and it means that a secular worldview affects everyone whether you are a devout believer or a committed atheist.

This makes it hard to see what God is doing when you live in North America. It means that when it comes to the holy we have what psychologists call inattentional blindness. Because of our predispositions we cannot see what is right in front of us.

This summer I have been reading the Portuguese poet Fernando Pessoa's (1888-1935) The Book of Disquiet. The character he invents for this pseudonymous memoir seems overwhelmed by modern, narcissistic despair. He writes, "Beside my pain, all other pains seem false or insignificant. They are the pains of happy people... I've noticed that unhappiness is something you see rather than feel, and joy is something you feel rather than see, because by not thinking and not seeing, you do acquire a certain contentment... All unhappiness enters through the window of observation and thought."³ This insinuation that thought leads to unhappiness is only part of a larger constellation of assumptions that engulfs us in our secular time.

The theologian Karl Barth (1886-1968) writes about this modern, individualistic way of seeing the world. In particular he points out how Friedrich Nietzsche's (1844-1900) ideal of an übermensch or superman is completely opposed to Christ. Barth writes that
Nietzsche encounters Christianity as an enemy because it opposes, "the lonely, noble, strong, proud, natural, healthy, wise, outstanding, splendid man, the superman... with [Christianity’s] blatant claim that the only true [person is the one] who is little, poor and sick, the [one] who is weak and not strong, who does not evoke admiration but sympathy, who is not solitary but gregarious."4

Nietzsche described as "slave morality" the Christian insistence on caring for the poor, the wounded and the dispossessed. He writes that the powerful should not be held back by having to care for the weak.

2. In contrast people in the time of Jesus share a sense that the divine infuses everything, that nothing really is apart from God. In this setting a lawyer comes and asks how to inherit eternal life. This is no different than when we, in our individualistic environment, ask how to be happy. He wants to know what this is all about. He wants to know how to live.

We see into the lawyer’s heart. In testing Jesus he does try to show off his own wisdom but still beneath this lies a genuine question. In response, Jesus tells him one of the most famous stories of our tradition. Here in San Francisco we see such suffering on our streets that we live the story of the Good Samaritan nearly every day.

On the road to Jericho thieves strip and beat a man severely. The Greek word is hēmīthanē – a hemisphere is half a sphere, hēmīthanē means half dead.5 I’ve taught this story more often to children than adults and they feel horrified when the priest and Levite pass by on the other side of the road.

The story is not really about the unfortunate man, or even the authorities who ignore him. It is about the Samaritan, an enemy of the wounded man's people. Yet this is the only one who sees him. The whole story turns on a single word splagnizesthai. It means more than simple compassion. This feeling comes from our guts, our bowels, the very deepest part of us. In the New Testament this word is only used for Jesus and other closely related figures in the parables.6 Our deepest suffering, what we cannot even express in words, Jesus takes on himself.

The Greek word for wound is traumata. Like the Good Samaritan, Jesus binds up our wounds, heals our traumas, leads us to the place where we can recover our life. Because we too often walk by people suffering terribly on the street we cannot feel worthy of Jesus' invitation.
I don't know about you but every so often the protective veil of illusion that I am indeed a decent person becomes torn and I see into the truth of my own selfishness. This week I felt this so deeply. This story with the events of our life can reveal us to ourselves. And sometimes we do not like what we see.

I went to my clergy group on Wednesday with these feelings and through God’s grace a colleague read Mary Oliver’s poem “Gethsemane.” It is about the way that the disciples failed to stay up with Jesus on the night before his arrest.

"The grass never sleeps. / Or the rose. / Nor does the lily have a secret eye that shuts until morning. // Jesus said, wait with me. But the disciples slept.// The cricket has such splendid fringe on its feet, / and it sings, have you noticed, with its whole body, / and heaven knows if it even sleeps."

"Jesus said, wait with me. And maybe the stars did, maybe / the wind wound itself into a silver tree, and didn't move / maybe / the lake far away, where once he walked as on a blue pavement, / lay still and waited, wild awake. // Oh the dear bodies, slumped and eye-shut, that could not / keep vigil, how they must have wept, / so utterly human, knowing this too / must be part of the story."

When my colleague read this I felt a huge relief. In a way I joined the human race again. We are all brothers and sisters who fall short. We are all together as people who know what we should have done but somehow couldn't do it.

So if the power of the story does not lie in making us feel guilty, what does it do? It gives us a vivid picture of what will make us happy, of what we can do to inherit eternal life. It reminds us that love is primarily an action and only secondarily is it a thought or a feeling. It encourages us to start where we are, to begin with little steps like helping when we don't really feel like it, or being patient with someone who we find difficult, or trying to be less angry when we feel slighted.

Karl Barth believes that the whole purpose of being human is to profoundly encounter God and each other. Every moment, in every thought and action we move closer or further away from that ideal. Quite simply if you want to be happy, find a way to take care of your neighbor – because that’s what we were made to do.

From Jesus’ perspective migrant children at the border are not a distraction from the economy or competing with the people who already live here. Caring for those like them is the reason for human society.
3. As you go out to be Samaritans in the world I want to share the story of one ordinary person who was inspired by Jesus to do something really heroic. On December 11, 1969 at the 11:00 a.m. service with five hundred people in attendance a shy, unassuming, perhaps even awkward thirty-two year old acolyte named Richard Daller stood up to read the Epistle at this lectern. Instead he read a prepared statement that condemned the way that gay people are treated in society. His powerful words about the love of Jesus have helped us come along way show in recognizing the humanity of every person.

You can imagine the tension. Six people walked out, one of whom yelled, "Give up the pulpit. You have no right to do this!" Three quarters of the way through Dean Julian Bartlett walked calmly over and whispered to him. The Dean waited for him to finish and then went into the lectern and stood there silently for a moment before addressing the crowd. He described Daller, "as a faithful member of the church who has served it well." He drew our attention to the pain that was so powerful that it would lead one of us to do this.9

In conclusion it is possible to step out of the world as we were taught to see it. We can be free of the narcissistic individualism focused exclusively on pampering our needy ego. We can begin to see the holiness that stands right in front of us. Real people are not superior, brilliant, independent, beautiful and above everything. The true person is vulnerable and imperfect, not deserving but worthy of love, like you and me.

So begin where you are. Wait with Jesus. Find happiness in your neighbor so that you may live. See how the divine infuses everything. Inherit eternal life.

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5 A compound word formed by hēious and thnēskō
7 Mary Oliver "Gethsemane." https://thevalueofsparrows.com/2015/03/21/poetry-gethsemane-by-mary-oliver/
8 He calls this "being in encounter." Karl Barth, *Church Dogmatics III.2: The Doctrine of Creation* tr. H Knight, G.W. Bromiley, J.K.S. Reid, R.H. Fuller (NY: T & T Clark, 1960) 250ff.