

“AND A HAPPY NEW YEAR!”

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Psalm 67; Luke 19:1-9

Several years ago Ellen Goodman began her newspaper column with the following observations:

The year is still young, the days still numbered in single digits, when my friend extends her annual greeting. Happy New Year, she says, with the enthusiasm of a tolltaker telling commuters to have a nice day.

The truth is that my old friend is not thinking of a happy new year. She takes on January with something less than the good cheer she left behind in December. She encounters each new year with an icy stare, a certain set expression around the jawline. This morning she looks, well, resolute. And full of resolutions.

On her New Year's list, there are admonitions about work and working out. There are rules about belt-tightening her body and her budget. There are visions of a year destined to be lean and more than a bit mean. The good news, she says with just a hint of self-deprecating irony, is that she has yet to break a single promise.

My friend is a resolutions recidivist and we both know it. I recognize certain perennial entries to her list. The same five pounds have made their cameo reappearance. So has the promise to pay off her credit cards, to work harder, to really, finally, learn Spanish, and to NOT: not watch television, not eat fat, not let the laundry, the bills, the errands pile up. [“New Year's resolutions should include entries for happiness,” BLOOMINGTON HERALD-TIMES, January 7, 1994]

In thinking about the way many of us approach the new year, the same question occurred to me that occurred to Ellen Goodman: “where on this list is your happy new year?” A resolute new year, we can see. A more productive new year, perhaps. A more efficient, or more disciplined, or more accomplished new year. But where is happy?

Every year when I was a pastor in Bloomington a group of us from the church would go Christmas caroling to the homebound. We would conclude our singing at every stop with “We Wish You a Merry Christmas.” You know how it goes, and how it ends: “and a happy new year!” Sometimes it seemed a bit ironic. Not everyone to whom we sang was in the best of circumstances. Some were very limited in what they can do. Some, in fact, were barely hanging on to dear life. But I think we really meant it when we sang it. We really did wish them merriment and happiness. We really were not trying to tell anyone to be more resolute, more efficient, more disciplined, or whatever. Whatever their circumstances and limitations, we wanted them to experience joy.

Yet a lot of New Year's sermons seem to be focused on moral improvement of one kind or

another. I have preached a few of these myself, and I suspect you have heard others as well. It is a great time to talk about “turning over a new leaf,” or “starting fresh and anew,” or “letting bygones be bygones.” Change is the order of the day. And not just change, but change that signals moral betterment, greater accomplishment, more faithful and effective service. Isn’t that what New Year’s resolutions are all about? I’ve never personally indulged much in New Year’s resolutions because I know I wouldn’t be very good at keeping them. You don’t just decide to do something, even if you know it is something that you should do, and then do it. There must be a desire or motivation that goes deeper than knowing what is good for you. There must be some hunger or yearning or passion to change, in order for change to become real. And if that motivation is there, then making a resolution is mostly a way of acknowledging and making clear and intentional whatever it is that you truly desire.

Of course, just as being better is not just a matter of deciding to be better, being happy is not just a matter of deciding to be happy. Whatever makes us happy or glad often comes from beyond ourselves, and often when we least expect it. I chose this morning’s Old and New Testament readings because each, in its own way, is an expression of gladness. The passage from Psalm 67 is a song of gladness, a poem prayer of rejoicing: The psalmist starts out in the third person, but quickly turns to direct, second person address to God: “May God be gracious to us and bless us . . . that your way may be known upon earth, your saving power among all nations. Let the people praise you, O God; let all the peoples praise you.” With these words the psalmist implicitly declares the power of God—to be gracious and to bless. The psalm is a prayer for God’s blessing, but also a prayer that the goodness of this God—a goodness too good to keep a secret—be made so manifest that all the nations, all the world, can see. Because this God is a God who deals equitably with all peoples and guides them upon the earth, because this God blesses us all through the earth’s bounteous yield, “Let the nations be glad and sing for joy.”

Turning to our New Testament text from Luke, we find the only place in the New Testament where the word “happy” appears, at least in the NRSV, although the word “glad” appears in several places. Luke’s story of Zacchaeus is familiar to us all, but what we usually think we hear in this story is the account of a sorry sinner who repents and is restored to fellowship with God and neighbor. In fact, there is no indication in the story that Zacchaeus is an unjust man, only that he is regarded as a sinner because of his occupation as a tax collector. He is rich, socially isolated, probably despised, but not necessarily unjust. When Jesus invites himself home to stay with Zacchaeus, Luke says that Zacchaeus “hurried down [from the tree] and was happy to welcome him” [19:6]. Here was a man who was delighted to have Jesus as his guest, so delighted that he offers to give away half of all his possession and, if he has ever cheated anyone of anything, to repay four times over. “Today,” says Jesus, “salvation has come to this house, because he too is a son of Abraham” [19:9].

The common view that Zacchaeus was a shriveled-soul of a man is hardly justified by this text. The view that he undergoes some profound moral transformation, that he repents of being a cheat and a fraud in order to become a benefactor instead, cannot be substantiated here. Rather, the point of the story is that in being addressed and accepted by Jesus, Zacchaeus found something

that filled his cup of joy to overflowing. He found a deep gladness that was life-transforming.

Christian writer Parker Palmer speaks of Christian vocation as the place where our deep gladness meets the world's deep need. I like that way of putting it because I do not believe that God calls us merely to do right or be good, but also to be glad. We have a great tendency to over-moralize the Christian life. We tend to define the good life as a life of being good, or doing good. Hence all those New Year's resolutions that are supposed to make us better persons than we are. The gospel of Jesus Christ is not a gospel of self-improvement. And it is not just about leaving the world a better place than we found it. It is "good news of great joy." God desires for us deep joy and gladness.

Some years ago a survey was taken of people over the age of 95. That is a very select pool, of course, so they may not see the world quite the same as the rest of us do. In any case, one question had to do with what they might do differently if they had it to do over. And the most frequent responses were to *reflect more* and to *risk more*. Don't you find that interesting? Maybe they all worked hard, behaved themselves, ate good diets, watched their weight, and got plenty of exercise, so that's why these were not on their list. But I doubt it. It sounds to me like they were saying that they would like to have been more open to the deeper joys of life, that invariably come to us from beyond ourselves.

Ellen Goodman writes, "What would happen if we wrote down our six, eight, or ten best moments over the past year. What if we ranked the hours that energized whole weeks; the exchanges that made us think or feel most deeply. A list of what made that year worth living. The non-aerobic highs.

"Would there be any relationship between the list marked resolutions and the one marked pleasures? Between our stated goals and our remembered joys? Are we trying to get to where we really want to be?" [op. cit.]

The questions are obviously rhetorical. It hardly seems that we invest as much time and energy in those things that might give happiness and joy as we do in those things that we suppose will improve us, or others, and our lives. The two are not necessarily mutually exclusive, but they do reflect two very different perspectives, two very different ways of regarding the task of living. As Goodman notes, "Too many friendships--the true casualty of our time--languish" at the bottom of our list of priorities of things to do. "Too many marriages grow numb waiting for intimate stretches of time together. Too few of us resolve to sing or to walk in the snow, to make love or to make someone laugh." [op. cit.]

Happiness is not exactly to be had by pursuing it, but it often seems as if we are running away from it. Biblically speaking, God is pursuing us and our happiness, and you would think the least we could do would be to make some room in our lives for those things that don't exactly fit our self-improvement list. We might at least give joy and gladness a chance!

Reflect more. And risk more. Seventeen years ago William Leety, who was then a pastor in

Scranton, PA, proposed some new year's resolutions that caught my attention when they were printed in THE PRESBYTERIAN OUTLOOK [January 15, 1990]. He wrote, "If a person were looking 10 years ahead, I'd suggest:

- read three books a year written by people with whom you are sure you disagree;
- travel someplace you haven't been, in your own town;
- plan a night a month to yourself, without television, book, people; just to take an evening or a meal with your own company;
- find reason to throw one 'party' a year;
- pay to take a class in something in which you've been interested for a long time;
- discover some way to ensure that you will hold a baby at least once every six months;
- plant a tree or shrub;
- visit a college and sit on a bench watching students pass and talk for an hour;
- listen to a person over 80 years old for at least an hour a month;
- play at something new, no matter how outrageous: skiing, softball, working puzzles, bridge or pinochle;" and so on.

The list is hardly complete or perfect, but it's a good start. Reflect more, risk more; and do some things that have nothing obvious to do with self-improvement, but that do evidently have something to do with becoming more open to the world around you, more open to other ways of seeing, feeling, knowing, and caring. Doing these things, it would seem, might also help you to become more aware of your own feelings and needs. And, one would hope, doing these things might open you up to greater and deeper possibilities for happiness and joy.

Nothing against a prosperous, efficient, disciplined, morally self-improved, filled with greater accomplishments New Year--if that is where your deep gladness is to be found. But consider that it may not necessarily be so. And try not to let whatever you are resolved to do keep you from sharing, and possibly yourself enjoying, a happy new year. AMEN.