



The Brass Ring

A sermon by YMI founder, the Rev. Harold E. Masback, III. Focal scripture: Psalm 23 and Luke 17:20-21.



THE BRASS RING

The Rev. Harold E. Masback, III, May 2, 2013

Psalm 23

1 The LORD is my shepherd; I shall not want. 2 He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters. 3 He restoreth my soul: he leadeth me in the paths of righteousness for his name's sake. 4 Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil: for thou art with me; thy rod and thy staff they comfort me. 5 Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of mine enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over. 6 Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life: and I will dwell in the house of the LORD for ever.

Luke 17:20-21

20 And when he was demanded of the Pharisees, when the kingdom of God should come, he answered them and said, The kingdom of God cometh not with observation: 21 Neither shall they say, Lo here! or, lo there! for, behold, the kingdom of God is within you.

Just about every Sunday after church our family would squeeze into the car for a seemingly endless ride to New York City to visit our grandparents. Following brunch, my brother and I would squirm through a long afternoon watching television on a fuzzy little black and white screen while the grownups talked and then another long ride home in traffic. But on a sunny May day like today, we could always campaign for an outing to the fireboat docked across the FDR Drive by Gracie Mansion or to the Central Park Zoo, or to a personal favorite, the Central Park Carousel.

Now the old carousel was not exactly a thrill ride, but it provided yet another arena for the endless sibling rivalry that was our childhood. This time, the competition was all about grasping the brass ring.

A mechanical arm dispensed rings as the outer horses circled by, and, if we gripped the pommel firmly, and leaned way over, and stretched our little arms out as far as they could reach, we just might be able to grab a ring from the dispenser. Missing the ring all together meant the agony of defeat; grabbing the usual iron ring meant a momentary thrill of victory, but grasping the occasional brass ring meant bragging rights all the way home. That's what you most wanted. The ultimate prize. The brass ring.

What's the brass ring in your life? What's your ultimate prize? What do you most want from life? If you could set only one goal, make only one wish, lift only one prayer for your life, for your children's lives, for your grandchildren's lives, what would it be?

As I've asked this question in classes and retreats over the years, folks of all ages have responded saying their deepest hopes are for happiness, or for health, or for knowing Jesus, or joy, or success, or love. And I imagine that as you mull the question over this morning your answers are similar. Given our common humanity, our species has been harboring the same deep hopes for thousands of years.

Twenty-three hundred years ago, Aristotle concluded that happiness is the one ultimate good desired by all humanity. There are other worthy attributes we seek, like health, integrity, success, and love. But even as these are worthy goals in and of themselves, behind them always lies our hope that they will, in turn, lead to the ultimate goal of happiness. Happiness, wrote Aristotle, is the one ultimate goal, the one goal we seek only for itself. [Nicomachean Ethics, at 1.7.8]

Of course, when Aristotle spoke of happiness he wasn't talking about just a transient experience of pleasant surroundings, and neither are we. Push us a bit when we say we just want our children to be happy, and our answers will run well past mere passing pleasures, or comfortable homes or entertaining days. What we really most want for our children and for ourselves is a life of deep, enduring joy, a life worth living, a life that is led well and goes well, a flourishing life.

The ancient Israelites associated lives of joy and flourish with the "Promised Land," with Canaan; and they wandered through the wilderness in their pilgrimage to the "Land of Milk and Honey." The Puritans sailed across the Atlantic and pushed south and west to this village they called Canaan Parish in their pilgrimage to the "new promised land." And so it is with every one of us here in this room. Virtually every one of us followed a personal pilgrimage to this town with hopes that New Canaan would prove the place where we could put together the circumstances that would yield deep joy and flourishing lives: circumstances like safe streets, good schools, decent friends, financial success, good commutes. Well, okay, maybe only tolerable commutes.

Every human life can be viewed as a pilgrimage – a pilgrimage to the deep joy we seek for ourselves and for our loved ones. So it is with us. So it was with the ancient Greeks. And so it undoubtedly was with the Psalmist who wrote the 23rd Psalm.

We can imagine in our mind's eye how the Psalmist went about his pilgrimage in the old Canaan three thousand years ago – hoping and planning and laboring as we do to arrange the circumstances of home and community and vocation that would yield joy for him and his family. And while we know very little about the particulars of the Psalmist's life, we know that somewhere along his pilgrimage he learned both life's bitterest lesson and life's greatest lesson. And he learned them both when his pilgrimage led through the valley of the shadow of death.

"Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death" We don't know precisely

what happened to the Psalmist. But we can extrapolate from our own lives. However alluring the attractions of Canaan, there must have come a time when the Psalmist found the pleasant circumstances of his life collapsing around him. Whatever securities he had established in full larders and strong walls and robust health were overwhelmed, and he faced the ultimate circumstance beyond his control – he faced death. And there he learned life’s bitterest lesson.

And the bitterest lesson is this: God does promise the unconditional love and deep joy of green pastures and still waters, but God does not promise immortal worldly existence, or lives of unbroken pleasant circumstances, or immunity from pain.

As the Psalmist learned – as we all learn sooner or later – pleasant, prosperous, propitious external circumstances are good things, even very good things, but they are the iron ring, not the brass ring of life. They are the iron ring not the brass ring because they are so conditional, so contingent on determinants beyond our control.

As the Psalmist learned – as we all learn sooner or later – if our ultimate hope of joy is conditioned on pleasant external circumstances, our hope will ultimately fail. Our hopes for joy will fail because, one way or the other, the external circumstances we count on to deliver deep happiness and joy so often fail to fulfill their promise. Our hopes will fail because the grinding efforts to acquire and defend material riches bring with them so much anxiety and stress. Or our hopes will fail because no matter how strong our defenses and how robust our health, no life ever escapes its cup of disappointment, of sorrow, of tragedy. And our hopes will fail because eventually all of our pleasant external circumstances will be stripped away in the ultimate valley of the shadow of death.

But even as the Psalmist was learning this bitterest lesson, God was also teaching him life’s greatest lesson. And the Psalmist’s greatest lesson is this: “Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death, I will fear no evil, for Thou art with me.” The God of unconditional love and joy is with us, always with us, unconditionally with us. And just because God’s love is always with us – just because the kingdom of heaven is always within us, so it follows that true, enduring happiness, deep joy, flourishing life are never ultimately determined by external circumstances. Rather, they are always and ultimately determined by the internal dispositions and attitudes of trusting in God’s provision and accepting God’s love.

Think of your heart as having a row of binary attitudinal switches. At the end of the day, whether or not you experience deep joy and peace is mostly determined by whether your attitudinal switches are set by faith – set by faith to trust instead of doubt; to abundance instead of scarcity; to forgiveness instead of guilt; to love instead of fear; to confidence instead of anxiety; to grace instead of condemnation; to hope instead of despair; to optimism instead of pessimism, to communion rather than separation. Aristotle called these attributes, these attitudes, moral virtues nurtured by habit. Jesus bundled them up in a life he called “zoe,” flourishing life, or life in the kingdom of heaven. Paul called them the fruits of the

Spirit. Alexis de Tocqueville called them habits of the heart.

The Psalmist's greatest lesson is that true happiness, deep joy, flourishing life is ultimately determined by internal habits of the faithful heart and not by external conditions of circumstance. As Jesus said, "the kingdom of heaven is within." And since the foundations of deep joy are internal, they cannot be defeated by the external adversities of life. It turns out that God not only wants God children to have joy, he wants us to have a joy that is unconditional, non-contingent, invincible. That's the true brass ring of life, beloved: a joy we can experience on the many sunny mountain top days of life like today and a joy we can experience in the occasional shadowed valleys. A joy we will fully experience in heaven, but a joy we can already taste on this side of the vale.

What would such a joy look like in a lived life. It would look like the Psalmist singing of goodness and mercy after his walk through the valley of death. It would look like Jesus proclaiming peace and joy even as he broke bread with his disciples for the last time and faced certain betrayal, rejection and death. It would look like Paul proclaiming "Rejoice in the Lord always, again I will say, rejoice" even as he was imprisoned, flogged and facing execution. It would look like this 3rd century Christian martyr writing his last letter to a friend,

"It's a bad world, an incredibly bad world. But I have discovered in the midst of it a quiet and holy people who have learned a great secret. They have found a joy which is a thousand times better than any pleasure in our sinful life. They are despised and persecuted, but they care not. They are masters of their souls. They have overcome the world. These people are the Christians, and I am one of them." [Today in the World, 1988 p. 18]

Or, if these examples seem too remote and otherworldly, consider the examples and models we have encountered together throughout our nineteen year walk together:

Edna Demouchette, the founder of a prayer center in her Opelousas, Louisiana who would slip up next to dealers selling drugs on the corners of her shanty town and sing hymns so joyfully she chased them away.

Sherill Smith, the young mother dying of non-Hodkin's Lymphoma who read our her favorite scripture passages with Ginger Malachuk and beamed, "Ginger, with these I have everything I need. Everything I need."

Miss Ruby, the founder of a church to minister to crack addicts and prostitutes in the poorest neighborhood of Alabama who, when asked how she was doing, always smiled and replied, "I'm blessed and highly favored, on my way to heaven and enjoying the ride.

Allan Tibbels the founder of a church and Habitat for Humanity project in the poorest neighborhood in Baltimore, whose first words when he broke his neck and became a paraplegic were, "Well, God, you just made this project interesting" and then proceeded to manage the project from a wheel chair for over 30 years."



Judy Dunn, our parishioner who lost her daughter to cancer and then battled cancer herself just eleven months later and yet still calls our church the church of “living love” and can always be counted on for a big smile and a bigger hug.

David Rivera, Margarita Romo, John Villalobos, Erin Cortright, Jocelyn du Chatelier, Bill Stallworth, Gladys Vasquez, – the list goes on and on. Each learned the difference between the conditional joy of this world and the unconditional love that Christ lived and dies to bring. Each learned the genius of giving up that which they couldn’t keep to gain that which they couldn’t lose. Each grasped the brass ring of faith that comes from God’s hand. May God bless to us the grace to grasp it as well. Amen.