

*“A Declaration of Dependence”*

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So, how was your 4<sup>th</sup> of July celebration? Did you watch the fireworks? Did you get your pet blessed? Did you have your face painted at Drake Park? Did you eat too much at a barbecue? Did you enjoy some good patriotic music at Bend High School? One thing I have to admit that I really like about Bend is the way we celebrate the 4<sup>th</sup> of July. From the beginning of the day to the end, it is a blow-out celebration of our existence together as a nation that began with the issuance of the Declaration of Independence on July 4, 1776. Largely a document that spells out the abuses of the American colonies by the British monarchy and establishes the rationale for militant revolution and rebellion, it also recognizes certain self-evident truths – that all men and women are created equal and endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among them are Life, Liberty, and the pursuit of Happiness.

So, maybe a related question that would be good for me raise with you on this weekend of celebrating our nation’s independence is how are you doing in your pursuit of Happiness? What is happiness, anyway? Is it being able to have anything and

everything you want when you want it? Is it being able to do anything you want without interference from anyone else? Is it living in the security that no one can take anything away from you and no one can make you do anything, because you are more powerful than they are ... you have more money ... you have more wealth ... you have more important friends ... you have experienced more success, so you are in control of your destiny and you don't have to answer to anyone? Is our happiness dependent on the degree to which we are successful in being the rugged individualist – providing for ourselves, taking care of ourselves, defending ourselves from anyone who threatens our sense of well being anyway we must? That's what some people think that happiness is, I think – especially people who are kings or queens, or generals, or heads of powerful corporations. I think those are the things that would have made August Caesar happy. And King Herod. And many of the leaders of the temple in 1<sup>st</sup> century Jerusalem. And many of the zealots and rebels among the Jewish people. And many powerful and influential people in the centuries since then and even up until today. Sometimes those are the very things that I am tempted to believe would make me the most happy, too.

There is happiness offered by Caesars and Herods. There is happiness offered by power and money. There is happiness that is offered by the powers and principalities of this world – fame, fortune, the ability not only to influence, but even to control others.

But I don't think that kind of happiness was what Jesus had to offer the world or wanted his followers to pursue. Happiness for Jesus was found in something greater than wealth, something other than physical or coercive power, something more important than individual freedoms. Happiness for Jesus wasn't based on money or success or one's place of privilege in the world. Happiness for Jesus was found in love – first in one's love for God, and then in one's love for others.

In chapters 5 through 7 in the gospel of Matthew, Jesus describes for the people who have followed him what life will be like and what will be required of them to live in a kingdom unlike anything else they have ever experienced or envisioned. Instead of the kingdom of Herod, instead of the empire of Rome, he will usher them into the kingdom of God. With Jesus' coming, the kingdom is already present and the people are invited to begin living as citizens in that kingdom right now. Happiness will be a certainty for those who choose to live under the

banner of God's love. But it will be a happiness found not in wealth, or power, or security, or influence. It will be happiness found in poverty of spirit, in humility, in the willingness to enter into the suffering of others, in the ability to extend mercy to those needing forgiveness, in the creation of peace between people and nations who have been at war, in the desire to live in relationship with God and with values and actions that bring delight to God's heart. It will be happiness found in loyalty to God even when the rest of the world taunts you and abuses you and persecutes you because of your love for God and your courage to openly declare yourself a citizen in the kingdom of God. Jesus begins his teaching about life in the reign of God's love, not with a Declaration of Independence, but with a declaration of dependence. To live as a citizen in God's kingdom is to live in relationship with God, who is always present with us, in whom we can trust to provide us with all we need for life, for true freedom, for real happiness, for everlasting joy.

So how are you doing in your pursuit of Happiness? Is the happiness you pursue the happiness of the world? Or is the happiness you seek the happiness that comes in relationship to God, depending on God's faithful provision of all you need, and God's loving presence that never fails?

Are you moving along in your pursuit of Happiness so that you are beginning to experience a magnificent trust in God, like the medieval nun Julian of Norwich, so that you can declare with her “all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of things shall be well?”

And how do you think we are doing in our pursuit of Happiness as a church? Do you think that we are a blessed church? Do you feel the presence of God with us when we worship together? When we work together? When we play together. Are we a community of God’s people who not only proclaim our dependence on God’s loving presence and provision, but who also celebrate our dependence on God? Do we as a community gathered under God’s banner of grace exhibit the values and the actions that Jesus says will bring us happiness? Several months ago, John Watts shared a book with me called Becoming a Blessed Church. The book was written by N. Graham Standish, who is the pastor of Calvin Presbyterian Church in Zelienople, Pennsylvania. In the second chapter of his book, Standish addresses the question *What is a blessed church?*. He concludes his discussion with these words:

*[A blessed church] is a place in which people form a vibrant sense of faith, hope, and love that*

*comes naturally from being part of a community of faith, hope, and love. The blessed church is a place in which people tangibly experience God as Purpose, Presence, and Power; and because they also embrace the sacred, they experience God through sacred symbols, sacraments, art, architecture, and more. Blessed churches are places where people serve God in ways that are unique to them and their context because they are trying to live in harmony with their calling. Ultimately, blessed churches are places that have discovered the great truth of congregational life: God wants to bless us, God wants our churches to thrive in their own ways, and all we have to do is create the conditions for God to be welcome.”*

I don't know about you, but I earnestly desire that every member of Bend 1<sup>st</sup> United Methodist Church would be able to say that they are part of a blessed church. I pray that we regularly feel God's presence with us, and that we depend on God's wisdom and love to guide us and provide for us, more than we depend on our own wisdom, and skills, and resources. I hope that we are a community of love and faith that proclaims and celebrated our dependence on God, who strive to live in loving relationship with God and with each other, and who consistently and boldly exhibit the behaviors and the

attitudes that Jesus promises will lead us to blessedness and happiness.

For the next several weeks, in my sermons and in our worship, the Beatitudes, Jesus' declaration of dependence will be the focus of our celebration and praise. We will learn together what it means for us to be a blessed church. And I know we're going to experience and discover things even greater than fireworks, and parades, and the best of picnics.

In preparation for our study of the Beatitudes, I ask you to think about the happiness God gives. Can anything cloud it? Can anything quench it? Can anything kill it? Is God ever in a bad mood because of bad weather? Does God ever get ruffled over long lines or traffic jams? Does God ever refuse to rotate the earth because we've done something that hurt God's feelings?

The answer to all of those questions is a resounding, No! God's happiness is such that circumstances cannot quench it. God's peace is such that no one and nothing can steal it. There is a delicious gladness that comes from God. A holy joy. A sacred delight. And it is here, right now, easily within all of our reach. We don't even have to pursue – we just have to decide to claim it ... live it

... be it. God's blessedness is yours for the taking ...  
right here ... right now ... Will you? Will we?  
Amen.