

## HAPPY-GO-LUCKY

2 Kings: 5:1-14; Psalm 30

A number of people have asked me when I was going to preach another of my movie sermons. It's been a while. But I try to oblige, and as I was thinking about my subject this morning—how our faith might give us a more positive and hopeful spirit—I recalled a review I had read of a recent movie that had received several Golden Globe nominations. The movie is “Happy-Go-Lucky” and it seemed promising. So we went to see it, and at least for preaching purposes we found it disappointing. The young star was certainly, positive and hopeful, but her exuberance was almost manic. Her ever-smiling cheerfulness got to be more than a little irritating. It was all a bit much, and not exactly the positive and hopeful spirit I had in mind.

On the other hand, the movie did contrast this happy-go-lucky spirit with a variety of negative attitudes that this young lady encountered. It led me to reflect on my own kind of negativity. In our mainline, liberal--today we say “progressive”—churches there is a negativity which I confess I have often shared. It is a suspicious skepticism bordering on cynicism of the authenticity of many expressions of religious faith. We are forever looking for ulterior motives or psychological explanations for why people believe as they do. Condescendingly, we think of some believers as either ignorant or naïve. We love the jokes in our e-mails that are often put-downs. We glory in our superior knowledge, and all of this we regard not as a kind of negativity but as the height of sophistication. But the net effect is that it greatly impairs our capacity for a positive and hopeful spirit.

Not that this is entirely new. In the story we read this morning, a simple and unsophisticated faith is contrasted with the attitudes of the culturally elite. It is a young Hebrew slave-girl in Naaman's household who has hope that he might be cured of his leprosy. On the other hand, when notified by the king of Aram that Naaman was coming to be healed, the king of Israel could only suspect some ulterior motive. “...he's trying to pick a quarrel with me.” And Naaman himself is skeptical, though his immediate reaction is a desperate “any port in a storm”. And when Elisha sends word as to what he must do, Naaman is not just skeptical; he is angry. Who is this prophet anyway? Why won't he meet me face to face? Doesn't he know who I am? Why doesn't he cure me the way I expected he would? Wash in that muddy little Jordan River? We've got better rivers than that back home! Naaman was knowledgeable and sophisticated, but his worldliness was negative. Having no hope, he was about to leave. and if it had not been for the positive and hopeful urgings of his humble servants, he would not have been cured.

How do we find a more positive and hopeful spirit? First of all, we could all use some healthy confession, some recognition that the sophisticated skepticism in which we take such pride is not that helpful. It often smells more like a sin than a virtue. Confession can happen through self-reflection as we become more aware of our knee-jerk negativity. But often it happens when someone we know and admire models a different attitude. I have had several in my own life, but one of the most memorable was my cousin Ruth. She had been a librarian all her life, mostly in the depressed old textile town of North Adams in western Massachusetts. She never married and when she retired she lived on a small pension in a one room apartment on the second floor of an old office building on Main Street. It would be an over-statement to call it modest, and we often talked about getting her out of a place where we wouldn't dream of living, but she had no interest in leaving. She loved it there, partly because she could go down on the street to see what was going on and to chat with the passersby. "Except", she once said, "I don't quite know what to say to the drug-pushers except maybe "Hi!". She was a pillar of the Congregational Church and her favorite church activity well into her eighties was mentoring members of the 8<sup>th</sup> grade Confirmation Class. "They're our hope for the future", she would say. She was the unofficial historian of northern Berkshire County, and used to volunteer at the tourist kiosk on the edge of town. "I try to answer people's questions", she told us, "but no one wants to hear as much as I have to tell them." She was well known around town and once rode in the open car as queen of the Memorial Day parade. My dad loved Ruth but thought she was a little naïve. "The world is not as great a place as she thinks it is," he said. And I suppose there are many who would agree, but no one in our family would dream of being within fifty miles of North Adams without visiting Ruth and taking her to lunch. I think we all wanted a shot of the positive and hopeful spirit of this modest and intelligent woman who didn't have an ounce of our skeptical sophistication. Whenever I think of her, and I often do, I confess to myself that I'm not like her, but in many ways I'd like to be. We all know people like that, people whose lives pass judgment on our own lives and bring us to a confession that opens up the only real possibility for change.

Secondly, we find a more positive and hopeful spirit by what we do and not by what we know. It is action and not thought or even inspiration that saves us. Naaman was healed not when he believed—there is no evidence that he ever believed—but when prodded by his servants, he acted. Hope is very much with us these days. It is the subject of many books and articles, perhaps most notably Barack Obama's fine best seller, "The Audacity of Hope". The other day, as I was working out at the gym, I found not one but two articles on hope in a recent AARP magazine. Hope is the theme of countless speeches and sermons by politicians and preachers. But informative or temporarily inspiring as these may be, they will soon be forgotten and we will not be changed. "You must become the change you want to see," said Gandhi.

Recently, Barbara Brown Taylor has noted that when people offer their opinions as to why the mainline churches are in decline they usually mention bad music, irrelevant worship, mean congregations and a preoccupation with maintaining the institution, but almost never an overemphasis on the intellect—which she feels is a bigger problem than anything else. She goes on to say that in an age of googling information

overload the last thing we need is more information about God. We need more God in our lives, not more about; God, and our skeptical sophistication is directly related to an overly intellectualized faith that has become as dry as dust. Someone has said that we do not think ourselves into a new way of acting; we act our way into a new way of thinking. It will be our action in response to prophets like Elisha and to the way of Jesus Christ, the living out of our faith day by day, that will heal us with a more positive and hopeful spirit.

And that is why the recent movie that speaks most directly to my sermon this morning is not “Happy-Go-Lucky” but “Milk” At the end of the film, these words of Harvey Milk appear on the screen. “You’ve got to give them hope.” That was his watchword and the mantra of his movement on behalf of gay people everywhere. He gave others that hope not by writing a good book or even with his eloquent and inspiring speeches, but with brilliantly conceived strategies, unflagging and undiscouraged efforts grounded in an unshakeable optimism that things would be better. That’s how hope always happens. The sophisticated skepticism of our over-active intellects can save neither us nor the world in which we live. But when we act out our faith, living the life to which God calls us, then we can say with the Psalmist:

You have turned my mourning into dancing;  
You have taken off my sackcloth  
And clothed me with joy.

So that my soul may praise you and not be silent.  
O Lord my God, I will give thanks to you forever.