

## HOW THE HAPPINESS SPREADS

You know, people come to church on Sunday mornings for any number of reasons. His wife twisted his arm and guilted him into it. Her parents insisted that she go to Sunday School. They didn't want to miss their friends. He likes to sing in the choir, and the choir always sings, so what's a guy going to do? Their children would think less of them if they skipped. There might be all sorts of reasons, some better than others, for going to church on Sunday.

But on Christmas Eve, I think, most of us come here because we are looking for something. We may be on a nostalgic quest, trying to recapture a feeling we remember from Christmases past. We may be so full of the true joy of the season that we cannot help but try to find a way to express it and share it. We may be hoping to sing the old familiar carols. We may be looking to be loved and affirmed again. In short, we are probably here because, in one way or another, we are looking for meaning in our lives.

Now the truth is, that this is often the reason we come here on Sunday mornings also. But on Christmas Eve it's right near the top of the list, isn't it? We come here to celebrate the Christmas Gospel in large part because we are looking for the presence of God and a greater depth of meaning in our lives.

As part of that search for meaning, from time to time we hold what we call an "Inquirers' Class." It's a time for people who are new to the Lutheran community to learn how we express the Christian faith in our circles, and it's a time for long-time members to bone up on the basics and try to remember what they thought they learned in Confirmation Class. Somewhere in that class we draw a diagram. We put "GOD" at the top—we always think of God as "up there" somewhere—and we draw a stick figure at that bottom, that's "US." Then we draw an arrow from "US" at the bottom pointing up towards "GOD" at the top. That, we say, is what "religion" is all about, it's about people trying to find God, trying to find meaning for their lives.

Then we ask, “What do you think of that?” And people will usually nod and say, “Yeah.” “O.K.” “I guess you’re right,” or something like that. And then we say, “But, you know, that’s *not* how it works. That’s *not* what the Christian faith is all about. It’s not about us trying to find God. It’s all about God finding us.” Then we change the arrow so that it points down, from “GOD” to “US.”

About then the people in the group may nod again as they think about that new twist on the story. They realize it’s not up to them to find God; rather, God is in the business of finding us. Then someone will start to smile, and then the next, and the next. And you can watch *How The Happiness Spreads*.

Yes you can. You can watch *How The Happiness Spreads*. Earlier this month an article in the newspaper had this headline: “Turns Out Happiness Spreads Like the Flu.” Imagine that. “A study finds that people pass on their good cheer—even to strangers.” Listen to this:

Happiness is contagious, spreading among friends, neighbors, siblings and spouses like the flue, according to a large study that for the first time shows how emotion can ripple through clusters of people who may not even know each other.

One person’s happiness can affect another’s for up to a year . . . and while unhappiness can also spread from person to person, the “infectiousness” of that emotion appears to be far weaker.

When one person in the network became happy, the chances that a friend, sibling, spouse or next-door neighbor would become happy increased 8 to 34 percent, the researchers found. (*Minneapolis StarTribune*, 12/5/08, p. A-20)

That’s amazing, isn’t it? It’s like the flue, of all things! That’s *How The Happiness Spreads*.

Which is all quite interesting, I’m sure. But what, if anything, does that have to do with what we are about on this Christmas Eve? Well, if we are here tonight because we are truly looking for the presence of God and a greater depth of meaning in our lives. . . . If that is really why we are here, then the Christmas Gospel is just the thing we need to hear. Because it delivers on both counts, and adds a bonus. It tells how God becomes present for us; it offers new meaning for life; and as a bonus it gives us a shot at joy and happiness also.

Remember that chart we were drawing? The one with “GOD” at the top, and an arrow pointing straight down to “US” at the bottom? Well, the truth is, it’s not a straight arrow. It’s not as though God speaks directly in our ears, or sends us personal Emails, or whatever. Rather, the arrow has a symbol of Jesus on it, a bold cross-shaped Chi-Rho, which stands for Christ. It suggests that God comes to us through one special person, through Jesus the Christ. Which, of course, is what we are all about tonight, celebrating the birth of that Christ Child.

Folks, it’s a baby, right? Have you ever noticed how people act when a baby enters the picture? They get all “goofy.” *We* get all goofy. When we are around babies, we smile more. Our tensions fade away. We calm down. We become gentle. Babies have a way of tapping into our nurturing side; they bring out our caring instincts. Maybe it’s because they are so vulnerable. And so trusting. The point is, we become better people, when we hold a baby. We act more kindly when we are around babies. And in that moment we discover that we are happy. Then, as we look around us, we can watch *How The Happiness Spreads*. Isn’t that’s the way it works?

Now, have you ever wondered why St. Luke tells the story of Jesus’ birth in just the way he does? In such a charming fashion? He doesn’t tell it from the viewpoint of power and privilege, from the attitude of kings and rulers. No, the story is framed in a quieter manner. It’s the story of a peasant carpenter and his fiancée, and their return to an ancestral village, where no one is there to welcome them home. It’s the rustic story of the birthing of a child in rather inhospitable surroundings, where a feed trough serves as a makeshift cradle. It’s the subversive story where official announcements arrive, not for the mayor or the town banker, but for a few sheep herders out in the pastures.

So it’s an easy story for us to enter, and we are free to join those men as they rush down the hillside and stumble into the stable and stand there, hats in hand, grinning at the infant. Cooing and making those clucking sounds we make when we’re around babies.

And on our way back to the pasture, we too will share “all that has been told bout this child.” And our neighbors will smile in amazement, because that’s How The Happiness Spreads.

Did I mention that our chart is still not quite finished? There’s “GOD” at the top, and the arrow pointing down with the symbol of Jesus. Because God comes to us in the person of our brother Jesus. And there’s “US,” the little stick figure, at the bottom. The problem is, there’s only one stick figure. You need to draw more of them. Some tall, some short. Some with curly hair; some with straight hair. Some with shirts and trousers; some with dresses or skirts.

You need a whole crowd of stick figures. Because that’s how God comes to us, not singly and individually, as much as collectively and all together. It’s like family.

Prof. Richard Swanson teaches religion at our church’s Augustana College up in Sioux Falls. He says he has a Native American Indian friend named Martin Brokenleg, who tells a story from his days in college.

Brokenleg says he was driving home from school in a rickety old car, and in the middle of South Dakota a tire blew. The spare was in worse shape than the flat, so he walked toward the nearest small town. When he got to a phone booth, he called his mother.

“It’s good you are where you are!” she said. “You have an auntie in that town.” This came as something of a surprise to Martin. The last he knew, he was in a small town all alone. “You just call up your auntie and tell her what happened,” said his mother. Martin wrote down the number and made the call.

“Oh, nephew,” said the woman who answered, “I am so glad you called. I was just thinking about you.” Martin’s uncle arrived to pick him up. “You should eat and then tell me stories about your family,” said his auntie when they arrived at the house. Cookies and coffee flowed into more cookies and more coffee and then into dinner. “I was wondering who I could cook this for,” she said. “Are you sure you can’t eat some more? You look skinny to me.”

The stories continued to flow, because food and family always bring out the best stories. After the best meal in a long time, and after more stories were told and heard, his uncle drove up in Martin's car. The tire had been fixed. So had the spare. The oil had been changed, and all the fluids were topped off. "Nothing's too good for my nephew," said his auntie, whom he had never met until that day. "I was hoping you would come."

In Native American Lakota culture, an auntie is someone who will take you in, feed you, and tell you stories. She will be glad to see you, even if she has never met you. She may be your mother's sister, or not. She may be your cousin, or your father's cousin, or someone else's cousin. She may not fit into any ordinary genealogical chart, but she is an auntie because she acts like an auntie. She is family, and you are family, and things get shared, and that's How The Happiness Grows. (*Currents in Theology and Mission*, 2007, p. 104.)

So here we are again, the family of God together on Christmas Eve. And that holds good whether we are every-Sunday members of this congregation, or just occasional attenders, or guests from another parish or from out of town. We are here because we find God present in our lives when Jesus is present. And where he is present, life has meaning, because we intuit that it is now OK for us to be mortal and human and vulnerable. We have permission to be more caring and gentle and trusting. And when we become like this together, we cannot help but smile. And that's How The Happiness Spreads. Amen.

*Christmas Eve + December 24, 2008*  
*Woodlake + Richfield*  
*Dr. Mark I. Wegener*