

When I was in my late teens, I became fascinated with religion. Prior to that, I had been fascinated by girls, but when I noticed the girls weren't fascinated with me, I began channeling my energy and curiosity into religion. The wonderful thing about religion is that if you show the least bit of interest in religion, it responds in kind. By then I was attending a Quaker meeting, not fully involved with it, just hanging around on the fringes, trying it on for size, so felt free to attend other churches.

A church in Danville had always interested me. My brother had visited there and returned home to report that the minister had yelled his entire sermon, which had lasted forty-five minutes. Yelling the whole time, forty-five minutes straight. For some reason, I was intrigued by that and decided to see this for myself. The minister was yelling about happiness the Sunday I attended. The main thrust of his message was that Jesus didn't come here to make us happy. I glanced around at the people as he said that, and it was abundantly clear Jesus wasn't making any of them happy.

Sometimes religion has insinuated that if we're happy, we must be sinning. *Laugh now, because you won't be laughing where you're headed.* Artistic renderings of the devil often show him cackling with diabolical delight. When I was a child, I once laughed in church and got in trouble with the priest.

We've been thinking about the stages of life, and the gift each age group has to offer us. Last week, we thought about that stage of life when we learn to nurture those things that are most important to us. That may be our children, or it may be our values or career. But we learn how to develop and cultivate and cherish that which we hold most dear. Nurturing is a common theme in our 30's and 40's, largely because those are the years we are creating families or careers. For the same reason, because of the twin pressures of child-rearing and career demands, some studies show that age group to be the least happy period of our lives.

Today, I invite us to think about what life is like when we're in our 50's, the gift most common in that decade, and why it's important. The same studies which indicate unhappiness in our 30's and 40's, reveal that our 50's are the happiest, most content years of our lives. We are more confident, we have learned to balance the demands of life, we enjoy a measure of financial stability, we tend to be more proficient in our careers, we're in generally good health, we feel more free to be ourselves, to be who we are; and if we have children, they are starting to move out into the world. Whee!

And let's not forget the benefits of perspective and experience. We're finally able to give things their proper weight in life. Burdens and challenges that consumed us and weighed us down in our younger years are carried much easier as we age. We've learned to deal with difficulty.

I go visit my mother in the nursing home every day. Now I'm no stranger to nursing homes. I've been in and out of them since I turned 23 and became a pastor. Even worked in one during college. But when I was younger, I'd walk up and down the aisles and wonder to myself how those old people could stand living there. I thought that way for a long time. In fact, I thought it just the other day. How do these people stand living there? Then it occurred to me that most of them were in their 80's and 90's and after all they've been through in their lives, living in a nursing home was a cakewalk. They probably couldn't have done it in their 20's and 30's. But as we age, we have this deep well of experience and resilience to draw upon and we're able to face things we never thought we could. And not only face them, but have the ability to be content in the midst of our troubles.

We're able to say with the Apostle Paul, "I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want. God gives me strength in every situation." (Philippians 4:12-13)

"I have learned the secret of being content in every situation." That isn't something most 30 year-olds can say. At least I couldn't have. We have to have a little gray on our heads to say something like that. We build up to that. Time and experience have a way of bestowing wisdom, perspective, and happiness. We've learned to deal with difficulty. We've learned the secret.

Now, not always. Some people are foolish when they're young, and time doesn't make them one bit wiser. Donald Trump was in Iowa this week, spoke at seven events, hinting he might run for President, and people actually applauded. Now you know some of them were over 50, and should have known better. But generally speaking, as we age we become wiser, and consequently more content.

When I die, if Donald Trump is standing next to Saint Peter at the pearly gates, I'm in big trouble.

Here's the interesting thing about happiness. Of all the traits common to a specific stage of life, of all those traits we've talked about so far—innocence, curiosity, independence, rebellion, intimacy, commitment, our search for meaning, and nurturing—happiness is the one trait we once had and have to work to reclaim. Joan said one of the reasons she enjoys being a school librarian is that the little kids are usually so happy. But then life kind of takes that out of us, and we have to work to reclaim it.

I saw that happen just the other day. I was at Joan's elementary school, taking her a double café latte like the good husband I am, walking down the hallway, and there was a little guy skipping ahead of me, whistling and singing, just happy as could be. And a little girl came around the corner. Blonde curls, pretty as a flower, and she saw the boy and said, "Hi, little boy."

He drew himself up and said, "I'm not little. I'm six years old."

She smiled at him and said, "Well, I'm seven."

And the wind just went right out of him. His shoulders sagged and he just kind of slumped over and lay comatose on the floor wanting to kill himself.

I stepped over him. I said, "Get used to it, kid."

We were born happy, but life has a way of deflating us.

But if we're lucky, and if we work at it, we're able to reclaim the happiness we once knew. We learn the secret of being content in any and every situation.