

Homily: 5th Sunday Cycle B: 2024: Jb. 7: 1-4, 6-7; Ps. 147; 1 Corth 9: 16-19, 22-23; Mk. 1:29-39

“Where are We Finding our Happiness/ Spiritual Joy?”

1. In today's first reading we hear Job saying: *“I shall not see happiness again,”* as he has come to see his life as total drudgery. Yet has not Jesus come to set us free from such **spiritual despair**? Are we experiencing this joy and interior freedom from despair that Christ wants His followers to experience on a deep level? It may come down to **our understanding of happiness/joy**. **The first level of happiness** (emotion) - (not real spiritual joy: only at levels 3-4) deals with **instant gratification**: the life of sensual pleasure and possession of material things and people, *e.g., your favorite sports team winning a championship is an example of instant happiness on an innocent level; a sinful level would be seeking happiness by drinking to excess, abusing feel good drugs, or misusing the gift of sexuality to experience the intense, albeit passing, pleasure of the flesh*. **This first level of happiness** brings us some temporary satisfaction, but long term it passes away, and it can bring about addiction, interior boredom and sometimes self-hate - *see the excessive tattooing, piercing, “cutting”, excessive pictures (mostly immodest), dynamic among some people - because in this level of happiness everything is based on externals: how we look, how much money we have, how many likes we get on social media, etc.* The whole modern enterprise of TV/ internet advertising is based on this focus. **But in the end we should ask ourselves: does anyone value me for who I am as a person?** If we get beyond the level of seeking instant gratification then we come to think about **the second level of happiness: personal achievement**, *“If I achieve some things in life then people will value me for who I am.”* Our driven American society really encourages this type of happiness. But what does this lead to? Yes, we will have some ego gratification and may do some important worldly things in terms of success and even help a few people, but it is still unsatisfying deep down because it's a futile comparison game that we end up falling into: we are valued for what we do rather than who we are, which is never satisfying to the human soul. This leads to a type of **inner emptiness**. After all, there is always someone else achieving more worldly successes and accomplishments than we are. Consequently, if we stay at this

second level of happiness, we end up being full of jealousy, resentment, fear, contempt, anger and suspicion of others, and usually depressed on top of it. This is the thinking: “*your work is your identity.*” And so, if you are not working in a productive way, you are useless. In a worst-case scenario this can even lead to suicidal thoughts. This is not God’s vision of goodness/happiness/joy!

2. **How can we move into deeper meaning, purpose and joy in our lives?** Well, if we discover, often through a painful process of learning through “the school of hard knocks” (the challenges of life), that the way of instant gratification and personal achievement in the end is rather hollow, if not connected to a higher purpose, we hopefully by God’s grace will come to see that we need to start living for some **good beyond our own self** which is **the third level of – now spiritual joy.** *What comes of this? For example: we start to try to get involved in the lives of others by getting married and having a family and really focusing on them - living in self-giving love for our spouse and children; by getting involved in charitable works, or community activities or humanitarian causes to help others. All this helps to focus our hearts and lives beyond the externals that the worldly-minded so value, and it helps us to start to experience a deeper inner maturity of happiness/joy, but in the end again it may still be unsatisfying.* **Why?** Because if we focus our innate desire for joy solely on other human beings and helping them, we eventually experience dashed expectations and ideals because **other human beings always let us down to a greater or lesser degree:** this is probably why so many marriages end in divorce and bitterness on the human level - *unrealistic expectations of the marriage union and our spouse and children to make us happy - on a long-term basis.* For the third level of happiness to last, it must be rooted in **the fourth level of highest spiritual joy - which is participation in Ultimate Good.** What does this mean? It is the discovery of what St. Augustine, that great sinner turned saint, who searched for happiness in the lower 3 levels, in depth, put it so beautifully in his autobiography, **the Confessions**, “Our hearts were made by you, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you.”

3. This highest level of happiness/joy is the discovery that **only in a deep friendship with the Lord will we find ultimate meaning and purpose to our lives!** That is what every human being is looking for deep down, albeit often unaware and often in the wrong places: *in sensual pleasure, in personal achievement, in helping and living for others without reference to God*, as we know from the other 3 levels of happiness. **If we want to discover true happiness/joy we need to integrate the 3rd level which is love of neighbor into the 4th level which is love of God.** How? By cultivating, but **only with the help of God's grace** (we are not picking ourselves up by our own bootstraps, i.e., the Pelagian heresy St. Augustine fought strenuously against in the 4th century, which is so much a part of contemporary American life, that we can be good with our own good intentions without explicit reference to God or His grace): *a deeper life of daily prayer, generously living the teachings of the Catholic Faith on a daily basis, cultivating a life of self-denial and sacrifice for a cause greater than ourselves, participating in the gift of the Sacraments and fostering a life of charitable works in relation to our neighbor* - but doing the latter only after first **rooting** our charitable works in the love of Christ, and in prayer - so that the foibles and weakness of our neighbor, be it our spouse, our children, our friends, or strangers will not cause us to lose heart and give up. Then we will experience the gift of participating in the reality of ultimate *Truth, Love, Justice, Beauty and Joy* - which is the life of God Himself. **This is the life of holiness we are all called to by virtue of our Baptism, and it is why the saints are the most joyful people on earth:** no amount of suffering, opposition, or obstacles could keep them from inner happiness and peace because they had discovered over the course of a lifetime that the other three levels of happiness fail to satisfy the human heart, for truly “*Our hearts were made by you O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they rest in you!*” May we all **embrace** that same truth, and then our lives will no longer be a drudgery like Job's in the 1st reading today, but rather a light shining in the darkness of a world of false happiness, pointing ourselves and others to **the true joy** which is only found in a deep friendship with the Lord, leading to a life of self-giving love for God and neighbor on the path to Heaven. God bless you.