

One of the fun things about being a Quaker pastor is that you get to set on the facing bench and watch people during the silence. I know I'm supposed to be listening to God, but I'm easily distracted and have always enjoyed watching people. I remember, maybe ten years ago, when Joe and Mark Whipple were seated between their parents and one of them said or did something that made the other one laugh. It was a silent laugh, when all that stored-up energy gets expressed through quiet convulsions. You're biting your lip, you're not looking at the person, you're staring at the floor and thinking of things that make you sad, because you know if you don't, you're going to laugh out loud, in church, and God will strike you dead and send you to hell.

When I was a kid in the Catholic church, a rather portly woman seated in front of us, sneezed, causing a sudden change in cabin pressure that caused her—how can I say this without offending our sensibilities—to emit a succession of popping noises, which, because I was eight years old, struck me as the height of comedic expression. My brothers Glenn and Doug were seated on each side of me, their arms were touching mine, and I could feel them start to shake. I knew if I looked at them, I would laugh and end up in hell, so I looked down at the floor instead and thought of my poor Uncle Fritz dying in the nursing home and King, the dog next door, who had only three legs and couldn't chase squirrels.

Because I knew if I laughed in church, I would be in trouble. You did not laugh in church. Church was serious. The worship of God was to be done with earnest solemnity, not permitting frivolity or merriment of any sort. Outside the church, it was bright and unclouded, but inside the church no sun seemed ever to shine, no light or happy word was permitted to dispel the gloom, no laughter to fill the space.

Why do religions fear happiness? In Stratford, England, in 1668, an overseer was appointed to watch over the youth in church and to “use such raps and blows” as were necessary to control them. Around that same time, a justice-of-the-peace, Jonathan Trumbull, recorded in his law book this entry: “His Majesties Tithing man entered complaint against Jonathon and Susan Smith, that on the Lord’s Day during Divine Service, they did smile.” The newlyweds Jonathon and Susan were found guilty and fined five shillings, or a week’s pay. Why do religions fear human happiness? Why do so many religions bind its followers in a straitjacket of piety and gloom?

You might say, “That was over 300 years ago. We no longer believe that way.”

But this past week, I posted on my Facebook page that the goal of religion should be human happiness and a woman responded by saying, “If I heard that from the pulpit, I would never return.”

Human happiness is off-limits, a goal not worthy of attainment, lest a smile settle on the face of a believer.

There are approximately 20 major religions in our world, the great majority of which endeavor to make *God* happy. Making God happy is the primary aim of their faith. But among these religions there is little consensus about what pleases God.

Some religions believe God is pleased by right actions, but others believe God is pleased by right beliefs.

Some religions believe God is pleased when the poor are lifted out of poverty, but others believe God is pleased by the acceptance of one's station in life.

Some religions believe God is pleased by modesty and simplicity, but others believe God is pleased by extravagance and prosperity.

Some religions believe God is pleased by celibacy, but others believe God is pleased by procreation.

Some religions believe God is pleased by peace, but others believe God is pleased by holy war.

If one religion is for something, another religion is for its opposite. Since we are unable to ask God what He or She prefers, it is impossible to know who is right. Of course, the members of each religion believe they are right, and cite their holy books and prophets as proof. But there is no one standard of proof that all religions agree upon, there is only belief and opinion and faith. So in the end, we can only theorize about what pleases God. Though some theories seem more virtuous, they are still just theories.

When I was young, I was taught God was most pleased when I realized I was a sinner and needed Jesus. God was happiest, I learned, when I acknowledged my moral failure. This belief dominated my life for many years, so I was ever cognizant of my sins, believing such awareness pleased God. I was like the Psalmist who wrote, “For I know my transgressions and my sins are ever before me.” All around me, people of faith were telling me that sorrow and repentance were proper orientations to the Divine. But that has not added to my happiness, nor made the world a better place. It has only held me fast in the clutches of guilt and fear. Surely, that cannot be the goal and hope of God, or the purpose of life.

I was warned by the church to be wary of happiness, that it was deceptive, and like a spider was waiting to trap me in its web. Yet the longer I live, the more beautiful and worthwhile happiness has become to me.

In 1833, a man named Robert Ingersoll was born in Dresden, New York. Many people have never heard of him, though he spoke to more people than any other person in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Reviled by many Christians because he was an agnostic, he was deeply respected by many more for his intelligence and kindness. Close friends with the poet Walt Whitman, he delivered the eulogy at Whitman’s funeral. Upon learning of Ingersoll’s death in 1898, Mark Twain wrote, “Except for my daughter’s, I have not grieved for any death as I have grieved for Robert Ingersoll’s.”

Ingersoll wrote, “There is nothing a man can do for God, as God needs nothing. But there are many things we can do for our fellowmen because many of them are in constant need. All days should be for the good of man, and that day in which the most people are really happy, is the best day.”

For the next several weeks, I will be talking about human happiness. Because humanity’s efforts to make God happy hasn’t worked. In attempting to make God happy, we have made too many of our fellow beings miserable. It is time we concentrated on human happiness—our own happiness and the happiness of others. Though some people of faith believe the goal of human happiness to be selfish or sacrilegious, I do not think that for a moment. I do not share their fear that happiness will make us selfish, nor do I believe God is honored by solemnity and severity and grayness of spirit, by a daily admission of our sin, and a grinding march of somber repentance. I cannot look at a rainbow or a flower or a grassy meadow and believe God is drab and dowdy and humorless.

I believe in the God of laughter, in the God of joy abundant, in the God whose happiness is directly related to our own, that nothing makes God happier than the happiness and well-being of Her children. For there is no greater pain to the heart of parents than the sorrow and suffering of their children. And no greater joy than to see your children at peace and content.

My creed, Robert Ingersoll said, is this: That “happiness is the only good. That the place to be happy is here. That the time to be happy is now. That the way to be happy is to make others so.”