

The King and the Kingdom Series
“The Happiest Place on Earth”
Psalm 1, Luke 6:17-26
Rev. Joy Laughridge
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I want to begin today by asking you to think about or imagine a place that you would call your “happy place.” You might have more than one – it’s never a bad thing to have more than one happy place. Where is that place for you?

I do have more than one. One of them is right in my own home. I have a big yellow velvet chair. I bought it when I bought my house a few years ago. I remember seeing it and it was just what I wanted, but it was expensive so I kept looking to see if I could find something similar for a better price. I just couldn’t so finally I bit the bullet and bought the chair, and even though it took me about 7 months to fully pay for it, it was worth it. I regularly think to myself, “I am so glad I bought this chair,” and I love to sit in that chair first thing in the morning with my coffee, and my Bible, and my dog. Speaking of Brownie, I think it’s one of her happy places, too. We both like our morning chair time.

Indian Rocks Beach down on the West Coast of Florida a little south of Clearwater is also a happy place for me. Most beaches – as long as they are warm beaches- are happy places for me – but I think Indian Rocks is especially beautiful and I have a lot of happy memories of time spent with friends at Indian Rocks that make it special. It’s a place that I love to return to and it’s a place where I love to be.

So, we're all thinking now about our happy places, and I'm curious to know if when I asked you to think about that, if *anyone* thought about Disneyland – and I mean the original Disney Park in Anaheim, CA? I'm just curious because you may know that when the park opened in 1955, Walt Disney dubbed Disneyland “the happiest place on earth,” and that has been the park's slogan ever since. *The happiest place on earth!*

I read some funny little facts on Wikipedia about Disneyland's opening that would suggest that not everyone experienced it as such when it first opened. They had a sort of soft-opening preview day on July 17, 1955, and so many things went badly on that day that Disney and his executives later referred to that day as “Black Sunday.” For one thing, there was traffic. Cars were backed up the whole length of the two-lane road into the park. It also turned out to be an exceptionally hot day with the temperature getting up to 101 degrees and the water fountains weren't working because there was a local plumber's strike and Disney had to choose whether he wanted working toilets or working water fountains in the park that day. Food vendors ran out of food, and way before there was such a thing as fast passes, parents were helping their kids cut the lines so they could get on the rides. Those are just some of the things that went wrong, but, of course, Disney didn't change his slogan despite the rough start.

Even if none of you think of Disneyland as one of your happy places, let alone *the* happiest place on earth, Disney called it that and stuck to it because he wanted it to be a fun and joyful experience for people, and for some it is. You just have to be into that kind of thing, right? I mean, you either really enjoy walking around in hot temperatures, and waiting in long lines, and managing exhausted children, and paying four dollars for a can of coke, *or* you just love the rides, and the characters, and the atmosphere so much that you don't notice or care about the things that make a trip to Disneyland feel more hell than heaven for some people. If you're a “Disney

person,” you’re happy at Disneyland, even if every part of your day there isn’t *completely* magical.

So, what does Disneyland have to do with Jesus? That’s a good question.

Last week we began this sermon series The King and the Kingdom, and I mentioned that for a few weeks in a row on these Sundays after Epiphany, the lectionary gives us a collection of passages from Luke that we can take and use as little meditations on the Kingdom of Jesus. They help us understand things about what it’s like, and this idea that I’ve been talking about – that for some people Disneyland is a place that brings happiness and for others it isn’t– is true about the kingdom of Jesus, and we see that in today’s Scripture lesson when Jesus goes through that list of blessings and woes. In those verses, Jesus says that for some – specifically the poor, and those who are hungry, and those who weep, and those who are hated because of their allegiance to Jesus – those people are going to find happiness in the kingdom of Jesus- but others, specifically Jesus says those who are rich, and full, and those who laugh, and those who are favored by others – they won’t be so happy in the kingdom. When Jesus says woe to you, he is expressing grief and distress for those in the latter group because they aren’t prepared to experience and receive the joy and blessings of his kingdom. They are prepared to be miserable there.

This collection of Jesus’s teachings is known as the Sermon on the Plain. In Matthew, Jesus delivers a similar sermon that we know as the Sermon on the Mount, and it may be that these are two different versions of the same event, though there are some details that suggest it’s probably two different occasions. For example, in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus goes up on the hillside to create some distance between himself and the crowds, and in look he comes

down from a mountain after praying all night and he teaches on a level place. So, there are some differences, but the teaching is similar. In both of these discourses, Jesus is talking about what his kingdom is like, and specifically, he is talking about the ethics of the kingdom and how it will be and how it will look when his disciples follow him and live by those ethics. It's going to look different than what you're used to seeing, he says. In fact, the way things are done in my kingdom will seem kind of backward, or upside down when compared to the way things are done in this world.

Now it may seem like it on the surface, when Jesus says things like blessed are the poor and woe to the rich that it's the circumstances of a person's life alone that determine whether his kingdom is a happy place for people or not, but that isn't exactly what he's saying. He doesn't mean that a person who is rich in this life can't ever experience the happiness and joy of his kingdom. What he's saying about his kingdom is that in it, God's love, and justice, and righteousness are the rule. That's what makes it seem upside down or backwards- because the values and ethics in his kingdom run counter to those of this world. So, in Jesus's kingdom, there is no advancement of self at the expense of or on the backs of others. In his kingdom there is no reward for greed, and no special place for those who get ahead through lies, and corruption, and pulling the wool over people's eyes. In Jesus's kingdom, the reward is the joy of having a heart that is in tune with God's heart that takes delight in God and in God's righteous way. The reward is God himself, but this is where it becomes a toss-up as to whether one will experience the kingdom of Jesus as a happy place or not. People who aren't "Disney people," people who just aren't into that kind of thing, don't like it and don't want to be there, and the same is true about the kingdom. For the person who would rather *be* God than submit to God, the kingdom sounds hellish. For the person who isn't "into" things like love, and justice, and righteousness, they aren't going to enjoy a place where

they are no longer permitted to ignore God and God's ways- where they can't perpetuate evil and injustice as they pursue their own glory, and power, and fortune. That way of being and doing things isn't going to "work for them." It won't work for them in the sense that it isn't what they prefer, but it also won't work because it isn't how things get done in Jesus's kingdom. Things that might work in this world, don't work in the kingdom.

On the other side of the coin, for those who do love God's justice and righteousness - for those who *are* "into" the idea of being at peace with God and neighbor, for those love mercy, and for those who are interested in obedience to God and in living in a world restored and filled with God's shalom- they will find happiness in Jesus's kingdom because these are the things that Jesus and his kingdom are about. That doesn't mean that every aspect of their lives will be easy right now which is clear when Jesus brings up the difficult circumstances that many who are blessed do and will experience, but those who are on board with what Jesus and his kingdom are about will find joy there even if, like at Disneyland, there are some less than magical things to endure for the time being. There is still the great happiness of being with Jesus and experiencing the joy of living under his just and righteous rule.

At the beginning, I asked you to think about a place that is a happy place for you, but we've come now to the real question which is what kind of place is the kingdom of Jesus for you? Jesus tells us plainly that those who align themselves with him can have and will have joy. Like the Psalmist says, they will be like trees planted by streams of water, bearing fruit, and their leaves will not wither, but Jesus also says plainly to those who want no part of him or his kingdom, "woe to you." For now, it may be possible to find some kind of happiness in this world and its powers that oppose and resist Jesus and his rule, but it won't last forever because this world and its

kingdoms are passing away and one day every knee will bow and every tongue will confess that Jesus Christ is Lord. He will be the last king and his kingdom the last kingdom standing, and for those who don't find happiness with Jesus in his kingdom, and for those who don't like his way, there won't be any other kingdom or any other way. This is why Jesus invites us now to come to him, and the good news is that there is still time to respond to Jesus and his invitation. There is still time to allow our minds to be changed and to allow our approach to life to be challenged by Jesus. There is still time to let Jesus start changing your heart so that if his kingdom isn't a place that already brings you happiness, if you aren't a "kingdom person" – that is a person who is willing to let Jesus be the leader of your life- you can still become one, and his kingdom can become a happy place for you and be a happy place for you forever.

The promise of the gospel is that kingdom of Jesus is in a true sense the happiest place of all when we trust Jesus and give ourselves over to his rule, but for all who have already accepted Jesus's invitation to trust and follow him and have allowed Jesus to challenge your approach to life and change your mind, it is good to be reminded today of our ongoing need for the grace that Jesus gives that enables us to keep allowing our approach to life to be challenged and also enables us to persevere as we follow a leader who leads us against the grain of the world. It was the kindness of Jesus and his grace that drew us in and moved us to welcome his rule in our lives to begin with, and it is by his grace and through his grace that we are empowered to continue to follow him. We need his grace and help because his kingdom is a happy place, a place in which we are blessed with every blessing in the heavenly places, but for as long as the possibility of resistance to it exists – out there and even without our own hearts- it isn't always an easy place. Jesus is faithful though, and he helps all of his kingdom people to keep going, and he will bring us to that day when everything is as it should be- when there will be

no more resistance, no more opposition to God's truth and justice, no more triumphs for the wicked. That will be the happiest day of all in the happiest place of all. Amen.

Psalm 1

The Two Ways

¹ Happy are those

who do not follow the advice of the wicked
or take the path that sinners tread
or sit in the seat of scoffers,

² but their delight is in the law of the Lord,
and on his law they meditate day and night.

³ They are like trees

planted by streams of water,
which yield their fruit in its season,
and their leaves do not wither.

In all that they do, they prosper.

⁴ The wicked are not so

but are like chaff that the wind drives away.

⁵ Therefore the wicked will not stand in the judgment
nor sinners in the congregation of the righteous,

⁶ for the Lord watches over the way of the righteous,
but the way of the wicked will perish.

Luke 6:17-26

¹⁷ He came down with them and stood on a level place with a great crowd of his disciples and a great multitude of people from all Judea, Jerusalem, and the coast of Tyre and Sidon. ¹⁸ They had come to hear him and to be healed of their diseases, and those who were troubled with unclean spirits were cured. ¹⁹ And everyone in the crowd was trying to touch him, for power came out from him and healed all of them.

²⁰ Then he looked up at his disciples and said:

“Blessed are you who are poor,
for yours is the kingdom of God.

²¹ “Blessed are you who are hungry now,

for you will be filled.

“Blessed are you who weep now,
for you will laugh.

²² “Blessed are you when people hate you and when they exclude you, revile you, and defame you on account of the Son of Man. ²³ Rejoice on that day and leap for joy, for surely your reward is great in heaven, for that is how their ancestors treated the prophets.

²⁴ “But woe to you who are rich,
for you have received your consolation.

²⁵ “Woe to you who are full now,
for you will be hungry.

“Woe to you who are laughing now,
for you will mourn and weep.

²⁶ “Woe to you when all speak well of you, for that is how their ancestors treated the false prophets.