

Hygge

In July of 2011, the United Nations General Assembly passed resolution 65/309 *Happiness: Towards a Holistic Definition of Development*. The purpose of this resolution was to invite member countries to measure the happiness of their citizens and to use the data collected to help inform, illuminate and guide public policy. Each year, the Gallup World poll collects data on subjective responses for a large number of categories tracking variables that lead to or cause happiness or misery. The categories are weighted in importance and the top six categories that are most heavily weighted are:

1. Income
2. Healthy Life Expectancy
3. Social Support
4. Freedom
5. Trust
6. Generosity

From that resolution, the first World Happiness Report was published in 2012 and each year in the spring, a new report is published. The data is collected from 156 countries. There is some movement in ranking from year to year for a nation's ranking. For example, the United States has never been in the top 10 in the world and in 2017 we ranked 14th. For 2018, the United States fell 4 more spots to 18th in the world.

What countries are in the top 5 for 2018? They are:

1. Finland
2. Norway
3. Denmark
4. Iceland
5. Switzerland

While there is movement up and down within these rankings, the top ten countries have been pretty stable over the years and usually only rotate a spot or two from year to year. Why is this so? What is it about these countries and their systems and ways of "doing life" that cause happiness? I have heard it said that "success leaves clues" and so perhaps a little digging for the clues we can observe for national happiness might help us in our own awareness and focus. This is no small task, and we will not come to a conclusion today, but my hope is we can expand our understanding so we might more fully engage in the process. After all, in our own Declaration of Independence, the authors began with these words: *We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all men are created equal, that they are endowed by their Creator with certain unalienable Rights, that among these are Life, Liberty and the*

pursuit of Happiness. It seems clear that some contemplation of happiness is not just an idle pursuit, but is perhaps more vital and critical to our spiritual development than we may realize.

For this excavation exercise, I want to call our attention to Denmark, a country that has been in the top 3 countries for 7 consecutive years. What are some of the clues we might examine in regards to this remarkable reflection on the quality of life experienced and reported by the Danes? In Denmark, there is a stable, well ordered government with minimal corruption. They have one of the highest quality educational systems and universal access to healthcare. They have some of the highest tax rates in the world but most citizens see this as the means to help create and sustain a better society for everyone.

Social scientists and psychologists point to one thing...a cultural framework and thought process that most likely undergirds and supports all other positive aspects of Danish life. This concept is the title of this sermon. H - Y - G - G - E. I have heard this word pronounced a variety of ways, so I went to the source of all "how to" information which of course, led me to YouTube. Many videos later, the consensus is the word is pronounced "Hu Ga". Will you say it with me? Hu.....Guh. The word was added to the Oxford dictionary in 2017 and following is the definition:

noun

- A quality of coziness and comfortable conviviality that engenders a feeling of contentment or well-being (regarded as a defining characteristic of Danish culture)

'why not follow the Danish example and bring more hygge into your daily life?'

as modifier *'count on candlelight—almost a requirement for that special hygge experience'*

However in further research, it seems the term is more appropriately translated as "*intentional intimacy*". I like that a lot. Most of us want intimate relationships where we are known and we know others profoundly and deeply. When we were children, most of us experienced this kind of knowing-ness and deep connection with friends. Most of us had a "best friend" and that might change from year to year depending upon circumstances and family dynamics. We know about that kind of intimacy in friendships. How about as we came into adulthood? Did any of that start to change for you? Do you still have a best friend? That is where the other part of the definitional phrase comes into play.... "intentional". Deep connection has a hard time happening by accident once adulthood comes. There are many demands and pressures competing for our time and energy and attention. Work, family, social obligations...endless distractions...even the wonderful ones makes intimate connections hard to attain and harder to maintain. It takes a lot of intentionality to grow in intimate relationships with others. But it seems to me the more we embrace

the idea and concept of Hygge in our lives, the greater chance we will have to actually take action to make it happen. In Danish culture, the concept is fully integrated into the cultural psyche and Hygge is a foundational and integral part of the sense of well being and happiness. It serves as a antidote for stress and also creates environments that build camaraderie and shared purpose and vision. Denmark is a highly individualized country similar to the United States. Hygge serves to promote egalitarianism and increases trust among the citizens. In the United States, we generally do not have a cultural equivalent of Hygge in any large-scale institutions...except for the church. It is in the church where Hygge exists or at least has a chance to exist, no matter what we call it. Our shared vision and purpose of being “bound together in Christ” allows intentional intimacy or Hygge to occur.

If you think planning for intimacy is too “structured” a plan or an attempt to “force” intimacy, I would encourage that we look at the concept as “setting the stage” for wonderful things to potentially happen.

Back in 2002 and 2004, Bruce Van Blair led two pilgrimages that followed in “The Footsteps of Paul”. We had about 15-18 of us traveling together for a few weeks on each trip. In the book of Acts, we read in chapter 16 how Paul was prevented from preaching by the Spirit in the Roman province of Asia (modern day Turkey). Paul and Silas walked clear across Turkey wanting to preach, but continually being prevented...until they reached Troas, a port city on the Aegean Sea. So Bruce being Bruce, he insisted we travel to Troas despite the tour company saying there was nothing to see there and wouldn’t we rather see other, more significant “ruins” or shrines. But we went to Troas. And about a mile outside of town, Bruce had the bus stop and said we would all get out of the bus and walk the rest of the way into town. There was only one road into and out of Troas and the road we would walk was the only path Paul and Silas could have taken to get to Troas as well. If the Spirit of Jesus spoke to Paul here, might the Spirit have something to say to us as well? So while I may not be particularly proud of my internal dialog at that point, I will share with you the cynic in me said “Oh great...so we are going to “manufacture” an experience with the Spirit?” Oh how naïve and perhaps even jaded I was. But Bruce set the stage well and the intention was set to ask the Spirit to come and speak to each of us. Well, we got out of the bus and began our trek into town. This was a few years before I had surgery to repair a knee that was failing and I had a hard time walking without a lot of pain. But somehow, I ended up in front of the group, walking at a brisk pace and I remember starting to wonder how everyone else was faring on the hike. When I was thinking I would turn to see, a thought dropped in my head and it seemed to say “Don’t look back”. I thought it strange, but I kept my eyes on the road ahead. Several more times the urge to see what was happening behind me kept coming and the voice kept repeating “Don’t look back” and so I did not. Then other thoughts came to me about my life path and some regrets I was experiencing feeling I had not been as faithful to answer God’s call as I thought I should have been. And then the voice said one last time: “Don’t look back” and the nickel dropped and I knew that was the Spirit extending grace and mercy for my failings and shortcoming and encouragement for the future. What I thought was a commentary about our group of

pilgrims on the road to Troas became a statement of hope for my future response to the continual seeking of ways to answer God's call on my life and to live out that Vocatio moving forward. While I would not have the word or concept back then, that was Hygge...intentional intimacy with the Spirit.

Over the years, I have come to appreciate just how important it is to create environments where that kind of connection with the Spirit can happen. We cannot force it to happen. We cannot control when it will happen or even if it will happen. But I think we can and we must set the intention to allow it to happen. That is the very essence and nature of prayer...to invite and prepare us for intimate and deep connection.

And if we are to be Christ's church, we must do that with others as well. In the entire history of the world, no one has ever been called to follow Christ just by himself or herself. Never. Ever. We are always called in relationship. What was Jesus's rephrasing of the Shema (Deuteronomy 6:5)? It is in Mathew 22:37; Mark 12:30-31 and Luke 10:27. This is called "The Great Commandment" or "Greatest Commandment". From Matthew: ³⁷ He said to him, "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind." ³⁸ This is the greatest and first commandment. ³⁹ And a second is like it: 'You shall love your neighbor as yourself.' ⁴⁰ On these two commandments hang all the law and the prophets." (Matt. 22:37-40 NRS)

Turning to our Scripture reading this morning, I want to talk a little about the context of 1 John. When speaking of scholarship around scripture, it is often difficult if not impossible to make claims of absolute finality. However that does not mean we know nothing, so for us to "hear" 1 John well, it is helpful to have some additional insight into the life and time of the writing. Our scripture reading this morning is from a writer we call John who was writing to a group of congregations as a pastor who passionately cares for them. When we read 1 John, we read one of three letters attributed to John that were written in the midst of a time of conflict in the church during the late 1st century or early in the 2nd century from a writer we refer to as John. He is writing to his congregations from two simultaneous perspectives held in tension, namely encouragement and warning or love and truth. These are in tension because John talks about this in ways that insist these perspectives and not "either/or" viewpoints, but "and/also" viewpoints. We must love and speak the truth. We are encouraged and we guard against falseness that might divide us. It is likely that the three letters (1 John, 2 John, 3 John) were written by the same author. 1 John is not really a letter, but a treatise or tract. It is impossible to determine the order in which the three letters were written. Is the writer the same author who wrote the gospel of John? Most likely not. But there are stylistic and interpretive similarities that suggest the writer of our scripture reading was a follower of John, the apostle and was part of a "Johannine" community or circle or school. The gospel probably was already written a decade or so before these letters. Now the community finds themselves recipients of increased persecution and rejection. There is a controversy in their church that has split the

Johannine community. A large and influential group of members have left the church. We only have John's perspective on this controversy, so it is difficult to reconstruct all of it. But it seems clear to me that the Spirit speaking through John is saying a similar message as I heard on the road to Troas; "don't look back". The message for those churches and the message to me was not to negate the past or deny the past or avoid looking at the past, but one of encouragement to look forward. And I think that is our message this day as well.

Transition is almost always difficult and we are in a time of transition. It is important for us to recognize all the blessings we have received as we move forward. It is impossible for me to be encouraged moving forward without some reflection on what has occurred in the past in our community of faith and it is impossible to do so without recognizing our similarities with the communities of faith John wrote to almost two thousand years ago. We have had the great blessing of Bruce Van Blair as our senior pastor for the past three years. There is an interpretive quality of theology that unique in its orientation, perspective and application and that is something I think none of us want to lose. If John's community might have been called a "Johannine" community or circle or school, this might be a "Brucian" community or circle or school. While Bruce will be moving his ministry efforts to another venue, we will carry on the message that continues to unfold in our lives together. For the past three years, the spiritual depth of our congregation has significantly matured and we are poised for even deeper connection and ready for what I sense will be some unique application of spiritual principles into our daily lives and our lives together as a congregation. Words cannot express the gratitude and appreciation we all feel. But then...who cares about words? From our reading this morning we are reminded: "Little children, let's not love with words or speech but with action and truth." That is how we will live out what the Spirit has in mind for our congregation that Bruce has worked tirelessly to embody and proclaim, not just for the past three years he has been back at our church, but for all of his ministerial life for the past sixty years. There is no one I have ever met in my life who comes to life with Christ with more intention, focus and discipline than Bruce has demonstrated and continues to demonstrate. He has done and continues to do whatever he believes the Spirit is calling him to do to be a faithful witness to Christ's redemptive action in the world and in each of our lives. This is the Hygge concept in action...intentional intimacy...with God and with each other...every day...all the time. This is Christian Hygge which brings our soul alive and engaged in the world.

But what do we do moving forward? I am doing a lot of talking here, but it is clear that we will not "think" ourselves into a new way of living...we must live our way into a new way of thinking. And that is Hygge. We must intentionally stage-set times for us to gather as a community of faith for shared experience and intimacy that ignites our souls as community.

Now I know how easy it is to lose focus and attention during a sermon and have our thoughts wander. At the risk of losing some of you at this point, I want to read an

extended excerpt from the book Soul Mates by Thomas Moore. If your mind has been drifting, and if it has, I take full responsibility for that...I invite your focused attention for the next few minutes

Excerpt from Thomas Moore – Soul Mates

"The soul is not meant to be understood. The only way to understand with soul is to imagine, to watch structures take form as our love and attachment deepen. At the level of soul, the way to understand is to "stand under," to move closer and closer toward that which has our interest. One thing I have learned from archetypal psychology is the wisdom of entering more fully into whatever it is that has captivated the soul, and one way of doing that is to let the current passion or preoccupation get on top, to stand under it until it tells us who or what it is."

"Problem solving is not an effective way to introduce soul into life. Soul appears in the opening made when a person finally gives up the effort, or when logic has finally exploded away, or when frustration has reached a level where the attempt to gain control gives way. Soul appears when we shift to a different level of perception altogether. The heroics of problem-solving keep soul at a distance, while the very defeat of our heroism lets soul in."

"Whether in family, friendship, or marriage, we would do well to remember these ancient secrets, for intimacy is an invitation to be drawn into the thick soup of soul--a familiar feeling to most who have ventured deeply into relationship. Soul is more likely to feel heavy, thick, gray and pasty than light and airy. It may reveal no glimmer of meaning or direction. In a relationship we may feel soiled by common thoughts, paltry emotions, and vulgar situations it conjures up, but it does no good to try to be above all this dirt (prima materia...the raw material life gives us, the soil of life), for this is the stuff of soul--our common humanity--in which hides the jewels of our individualities and our intimacies."

It is this very letting go and surrender that will allow us to live into a new way of thinking. It is not easy. In our normal learning environments with reading or lectures or sermons, the form is too passive and individualistic and does not integrate our head with our heart or body. It is not transformative. We need to experience new things "hands-on" and moving out of our comfort zones with people different than our usual circle of friends. We must see spiritually with new eyes or nothing really changes at a deep level or over an extended period of time. How often have we read a new book or been exposed to a new idea that was profound only to return within minutes or hours back to our old ways of action and assured roles and our patterns of response? The new patterns and new ways of living are always a threat to us. As long as our self-will or ego is in charge, nothing new or challenging is allowed to flourish. Unless there is something strong enough to rearrange our worldview that also engages our heart and body, we will most likely never move to new and deeper intimacies and connections with others.

Over the twenty-three years I have known Bruce Van Blair, I have seen Bruce create, teach, demonstrate and encourage the intentional intimacies of Hygge over and over. Now it is our turn...our turn as a congregation. I know the leadership of our church is prayerfully discerning how to move forward and set the stage for continuing and deepening relationships with the Spirit and with each other. Each of us has a part and role in that deepening process individually and collectively. The best legacy gift we will be able to give to Bruce is to more fully become a community of deep and intimate bonds of connection in and through Christ. Bruce has lived almost all of his life with that vision as it develops, haltingly, imperfectly and yet sometimes profoundly in multiple Christian communities of faith. The Brucian school of theological interpretation will continue to have and grow in impact on others as well. It may be difficult to see sometimes, but I see it and know the impact of Bruce's teachings continues to expand and influence many far beyond our Corona del Mar community and for that, I continue to be grateful and I pledge my intention to continue on that path of understanding and faithful witness and application as the Spirit of Christ calls me to do.

This day, we give grateful thanks for the faithful witness and leadership of Bruce Van Blair to this congregation and to countless others beyond. It is in honor of this witness that we also commit to "increasing our love for one another" as we have said in our recall for these many years.

I am hopeful that we will also consider Hygge from our Christian perspective and create ways to set the stage for Spirit to enter our lives and transform us individually and as a community. The last two verses of our Scripture reading this morning seems a fitting conclusion for this sermon. John tells us what he thinks God wants from us and what we receive from living that out.

"This is his commandment, that we believe in the name of his Son, Jesus Christ, and love each other as he commanded us. The person who keeps his commandments remains in God and God remains in him; and this is how we know that he remains in us, because of the Sprit that he has given to us."

God calls us to Hygge...each and every one of us...may we know it, claim it and live it out.

Let us pray.

PRAYER AND LORD'S PRAYER:

God of invitation...we have said a lot of words this morning. We want to live out John's encouragement to love not with "words or speech but with action and truth". But a few more words now...help us to move the words from our heads to our hearts as we pray together now as Jesus taught us...Our Father...[Lord's Prayer]. Amen.