

Proper 6 YA 2023
Keating Series, Part 2
Programs for Happiness and False Self

Come Unto Me All Ye Who Travail
By the Rev. Salying Wong

The story of Sarah in Genesis is full of pain. Her pain wasn't just that she was barren, but that she had not given birth to a *male* heir. In her culture, this was the path to esteem, and thus to happiness. Before we read about this miraculous story of her getting pregnant with Isaac in her old age, Genesis tells the story of her ploys for fulfilling this program for happiness. In one desperately cruel act, she had her husband rape her Egyptian slave-woman, Hagar. As a slave, Hagar's body was Sarah's property. Therefore, she could claim Hagar's children as her own. When the time came for Hagar to deliver, Hagar sat on Sarah's lap, and gave birth "for Sarah". The child was called Ishamel. Hagar resented Sarah for good reason.

Today, we hear from some divine visitors that God intended that Sarah bear a son in her old age. She laughed with scorn under her breath. But, then she laughed with awe and delight when Isaac was actually born. In fact, she said that everyone would laugh with her. So, was this it? Was this true happiness? Of course not. Hagar was not laughing, but crying. Sarah, in another shockingly cruel act, chased Ishmael and Hagar away into the desert so that they might die of thirst. Now, Sarah's happiness depended on the safety and security of Isaac's inheritance—the perpetuation of her own bloodline.

Richard Rohr says, "Untransformed suffering inexorably gets transmitted." Unchanged programs for happiness will repeat themselves. How does it end? How do we each stop the transmission of our suffering onto others?

How do we leave the programs of happiness that drive us to act in ways that hurt ourselves and others? This is what we're about in this sermon series I am giving this summer. I will be using the teachings of Thomas Keating to help us grow intimate with our wounds and to yield to processes that allows God to heal them.

Today, let's consider the durability of our programs for happiness. Sarah's case might be too cruel for us to identify with. We could easily say, "I'd never do that!" Let's look at something a bit more subtle. Thomas Keating tells a story about a man who had a program for happiness built on being better than the next person. His method was to drink everyone under the table. He felt a jolt of glee watching people pass out while he was the only one left standing. But, then he had a religious conversion and thought everything would change. He joined an order of monks and threw himself into religious practices. He prayed and fasted. In fact, when he noticed that when the other monks were getting weak from fasting, he felt a smug satisfaction that he was the best at fasting. So, while the situation and clothes completely changed, his program for happiness was the same. Instead of drinking everyone under the table; he fasted them under the table. In fact, his situation was even more dangerous than drinking because he convinced himself he was doing it for God. With God and the pursuit of holiness as his story, he was beyond reproach.

We can make all the resolutions we want, but if we do not change our program for happiness, we will just keep doing the same thing and just get better at fooling ourselves. Or, we will be so discouraged by our repeated behavior that we don't feel there's any hope for us and give up. Or, we project the problem outside and say we're just misunderstood and demand the world change and people change before we are happy. So, we distance ourselves from relationships; perhaps, we just cut people out of our lives all together. The reality is that it really isn't them. It's us. It's our programs for happiness.

Programs for happiness lead to confusion of the self. We are limited beings with unlimited desire, so we pursue fantasies of happiness again

and again, wanting more and more. “I am myself if I am better than the next person,” in our monk’s case. “I am myself if I become what people value”—in Sarah’s case. What is your case? Thomas Keating calls these fabrications of self the “false self.” Keating teaches that repentance really means to change the direction in which we are looking for happiness.

The reality is actually quite simple. We are who we are in God. This is our true self. Because our true self is in God, we are basically good; we are enough. We are good not for what we do or have, but because God created us. God loves us. Programs for happiness have carried us to a far country. Our hearts long for God, are homesick for God. Have you noticed this longing within you? The good news is that even as we get lost pursuing the fantasies that we think will make us happy, God is drawing us home. “Come unto me, all ye that travail and are heavy laden, and you will find rest for your soul. For my yoke is easy and my burden is light.”

This is what we will practice: how to notice when we have been transported to a far country, living as a false self; how to practice moment by moment the simple yes to God’s welcome. In this way, we return to our true self and know it means to arrive home.