

## **“The Magic Folger’s Coffee Can” or The Pursuit of Happiness**

**Proverbs 3:13-18; Luke 12:13-21; Psalm 86:1-10 6-22-08**

I don’t know any one of us who does not want to be happy. Often we look for someone who will make us happy or keep ourselves busy, busy, busy so we feel happy, or try to acquire things that should lead us to the same end result. But often we are looking in all the wrong places for happiness and often we do not see what it is that makes us happy even when it is right before us or within us.

Our reading from the Book of Proverbs tells us that happy people are those who acquire wisdom and hold on to it. It is far better than jewels or gold or silver. And, our parable from the gospel of Luke warns against being consumed by things of this world to such an extent that we miss all of life.

A long time ago I found a little story in a book entitled, The Ethiopian Tattoo Shop by Edward Hays. It is full of imaginative stories, some of which I will share with you this summer. The name of the story for this morning, which is really a parable, is “The Magic Folger’s Coffee Can.” I know you will see how it ties into our two readings.

### **“The Magic Folger’s Coffee Can”**



The little blond-haired boy was lost in another world as he walked along the winding creek, following a wooden stick that rode the gentle current of the small stream. To the boy the brown stick was not the small broken branch that others might see. Rather, it was a sailing ship and he, its captain. Lost in the adventure of sailing down a great river in some far-off land, the small boy was unaware that the creek was about to bend under an old, wooden country bridge.

As he passed under the bridge, the coolness and darkness of the shade created by the bridge overhead woke him again to who and where he was. But there was something more than just the shade that caused him to forget about his adventures as a captain on an imaginary ship. He stood there under the bridge, his

eyes growing accustomed to the sudden change from the bright sunlight; aware that something or someone was present.

He looked up to the place where the bridge’s timbers met the bank of the creek and could see in the darkness two small, bright lights. As his eyes became acclimated to the shade and shadows, he could see that the two lights were actually eyes and that they belonged to a tiny old man—or at least something that looked like a man! In reality, it was a troll with the most marvelously flaming bright, twinkling eyes you could imagine. He wore a wide and generous smile and said to the boy, “You look very, very happy, young man.”

“I am. I’m having a lot of fun now that it’s summer and we don’t have school. But you...you look even happier. You look like the happiest person I have ever seen in my whole life,” replied the blond-headed boy, his voice full of admiration.

“Well,” answered the troll, “I am very happy, but more than that I know the secret of happiness. Would you like me to gift you with that secret, young man?”

“Oh, yes!” said the boy, eager for such a treasure, eager to be as happy as the funny old man who sat with such contentment under the old wooden bridge.

“’Tis easy,” replied the troll, and from an old, brown gunny sack beside him he produced an object and tossed it to the boy. “Here, this is a gift to you. It is a magic Folger’s Coffee Can—fill it to the brim and you will be happy always.”

With great excitement the little boy caught the red Folger’s Coffee Can which the troll had thrown to him. With a few hurried words of gratitude he rushed off for home, intent on filling his magic Folger’s Coffee Can to the brim.

On arriving at home he ran to his bedroom and began stuffing the coffee can with his toys—his baseball glove, his stamp collection, his toy cars...and thus began, so very innocently, a lifetime passion.

As he grew older and entered high school, he stuffed the top grades in his class, football and baseball trophies and various other honors into his Folger’s Coffee Can. Yet for some reason the can never became full, full to the brim. He raced on in life, anxious to taste the happiness promised by the old troll under the bridge. In college he again added top grades, more intellectual awards, more athletic honors. He became president of his class and of several social and academic groups. He was voted the “most likely to be a success” and eagerly pushed that honor into his magic can. But for some reason, although each of these prizes had a very sweet taste, the coffee can never seemed to be really full.

Besides honors and high grades the blond-headed, good-looking, athletic young man also stuffed good times, good food and drink, the attention and affection of beautiful women and of many friends into his Folger’s Coffee Can. After each rich experience he would feel very happy, and it would seem that his coffee can was full. But by the time he would wake up the next morning it was painfully clear that the Folger’s can was not full to the brim.

Through his thirties, though he had a wife, children, three cars, a beautiful home, a successful career, and even two mistresses, he continued his personal obsession to fill the coffee can. He became head of his company, held great power and was respected by all, but he wasn’t happy. The now old and dented, red Folger’s Coffee Can sat on his desk in his walnut-paneled executive office. Every day he would stuff stocks, bonds, property and an ever-increasing parade of sensual pleasures into it, but it still wasn’t enough.

His friends told him that he had a winning personality and all the right qualifications and that he should run for public office. So he did, and won the election easily. Into his Folger’s Coffee Can he crammed all the respect, honor, authority and most of all the power of his elected office, but was sad to see that the coffee can was still not full.

Now in his old age, his skin wrinkled and brown-blotched with liver marks, his hair turned white and all but gone, he was making the final arrangements for the most gigantic of all international corporate deals. It would make him the most powerful and the richest man in the world. He signed the transaction papers and then walked to the window of his office that overlooked his vast corporate empire. With a wry smile he took the

multinational conglomerate contract and began to stuff it greedily into his battered, old Folger's Coffee Can. At that very moment he was struck by a fatal heart attack. As he stumbled forward, the Folger's Coffee Can slipped from his hand and flew out the high office window.

When the coffee can hit the pavement, it bounced high and freely into the air, almost as if it were glad to be out of the grasp of the rich, old man. With a sort of playfulness it bounced several more times and then rolled joyfully down the street past the tall office buildings. It rolled along, gathering speed, through the hectic business district, turned up a freeway ramp, and continued to speed along until it reached the edge of the great, noisy and bustling city.

The Folger's Coffee Can then rolled off an exit and turned down a street with trees and small, pleasant, one-storied, white frame houses. Slowing down now, it hopped the curb with one final, playful bounce and rolled to a stop in the middle of a green lawn, where a little, blond-haired girl was in the midst of a tea party with three of her dolls and her set of tiny white and blue-rimmed china.

The little blond-haired girl picked up the can and looked at it inquisitively. She immediately noticed something that its previous owner, the richest man in the world, had never seen—had never taken the time to see because he was so busy trying to fill it.

The little blond-haired girl was puzzled because the Folger's Coffee Can had no bottom in it! If its previous owner had ever stopped to look at his life, he would have seen a long trail of possessions, pleasures, honors and power that were left behind him. But the tunnel-like opening of the tin coffee can, unnoticed during the old man's whole life, delighted the little girl.

She held the can skyward, and it became filled with the golden sun. She held it up toward a bird, and it was filled not only with the beauty of the creature but with its lovely song as well. She filled it with her dolls as they sat in all properness at their front lawn tea party. She filled it with flowers and people, and running to a hallway mirror in her home she filled it with herself.

With delight she called out, "Oh. Mother, come quickly! A magic Folger's Coffee Can has just rolled into our yard.

Come quickly, Mother; I'm the richest and happiest person in the world. The whole world, Mother, the whole world is in my red, magic Folger's Coffee Can." The End.

(The Ethiopian Tattoo Shop, Edward Hays, Forest of Peace Publishing, Inc., 1999. "The Magic Folger's Coffee Can," p. 44).

All I could think of as I re-read this parable of life the other day was, "What does it profit a man if he gains the whole world and loses himself?" Our happiness comes from attaining the wisdom that causes us to begin to look around ourselves and within ourselves and find what is truly valuable for us in life. What or who is it that delights us and even amuses us? When we discover what it is we can never build enough barns or fill enough coffee cans, magic or not, to their brims to contain it. Life awaits us in all its fullness beckoning to us. It is up to us to live it.

This was an essential part of the message Jesus came to bring us. We need to hear it and live it.

-- *Amen*