

"The Anatomy of Happiness,"

5 June 2005

Bible Passage: **Philippians 4:12-13** (*The Message*)

"I've learned by now to be quite content whatever my circumstances. I'm just as happy with little as with much, with much as with little. I've found the recipe for being happy whether full or hungry, hands full or hands empty. Whatever I have, whoever I am, I can make it through anything in the One who makes me who I am."

There's an old *Hagar the Horrible* comic strip that show Hagar crawling and climbing toward a wise man at the top of the mountain. As the wise man came into view, Hagar called out, "What is the key to happiness?" The wise man answered, "Abstinence, poverty, fasting and celibacy." Hagar thought a moment and then said, "Is there someone else up there I could talk to?" Apparently, that wasn't what he wanted to hear when it came to finding happiness.

Today we're attempting to understand this illusive quality of life that we refer to as happiness. Oh sure, we can go to the dictionary and find out the definition, which says that happiness is a state of "being favored by circumstances, or a state of having, showing or causing a feeling of great pleasure, contentment or joy."

That's what it says, but frankly, I disagree with that first definition, because I don't really believe that happiness should be dependent on external circumstances. How many people do you and I know who have searched and clawed their way toward that which they believed would bring them happiness, only to wind up disappointed with what they've found.

It seems to me that some of us spend much of our lives chasing after happiness, but I wonder if we aren't often going down the wrong paths. We think if we just have more money, we'll be happy. However, research does not bear out the validity of that belief. Virtually every recent study on money and happiness has indicated that money makes people significantly happier only when it relieves abject poverty. Statistics show that the percentage of people who say that they're unhappy does not really vary between those who are considered rich and those who aren't. In other words, money and happiness do not go hand-in-hand.

There are other pitfalls that we succumb to in our search for happiness. Dan Baker and Cameron Stauth, in their book *What Happy People Know*, have listed some of the things that we often think will bring up happiness. The list includes: a life of leisure, status, possession, financial security and worldly power. However, once again, none of that is substantiated by those who study psychology and mental health. From my point of view, most of those things that we think are important are really quite hollow and empty.

Sometimes we look around us, and think that this person or that person must be happy, just because they have all the things we think we'd like to have, but it doesn't work that way. We're fooling ourselves, I think, when we believe that having all the outward looks of happiness actually means we're happy. I'm convinced that happiness has nothing to do with external circumstances. It's not something "out there," but rather is "in here." Happiness has to do with our internal state of being.

VIDEO: SHREK—"Happily Ever After"

That's very much what our Bible passage is trying to say today, too. The writer is Paul and these words are thought to be a letter that he wrote to the people in the church at Philippi. Apparently, the people there and Paul had been out of touch, because the letter says that he (Paul) is happy that they're once again showing concern for him. And then we have the words of our passage today. Paul writes: "I've learned by now to be quite content whatever my circumstances. I'm just as happy with little as with much, with much as with little. I've found the recipe for being happy whether full or hungry, hands full or hands empty. Whatever I have, whoever I am, I can make it through anything in the One who makes me who I am."

Paul affirms that external circumstances do not have an influence on him when it comes to his happiness. He would agree with Wilhelm von Humboldt who said, "Our happiness or our unhappiness depends far more on the way we meet the events of life than on the nature of those events themselves."

Paul knows that he has an inner strength, an inner resource that he can rely on to get him through any difficulty, and that's an important thing to note. Some of us believe that we can only be happy if life is going just the way we want it to, that there are no problems and no suffering. Life just doesn't work that way, and that expectation is entirely unrealistic. Problems and suffering are realities; that's just the way it is; but Paul assures us that we can discover a deep happiness in the way we face and deal with the turmoil that inevitably comes. For him, it comes from God—"the one who makes me who I am," he says.

For me, that's one of the marks of happiness. There has to be a spiritual dimension that fills us with hope about today, and trust in tomorrow. Our faith is the only thing that can give us the kind of confidence and trust that we can indeed live a happy life, and as we grow in our relationship with God, we gain a healthier perspective of ourselves.

There's something else that comes as a byproduct of having a spiritual realm to our being, and that's a sense of why we're here—our purpose for living. Baker and Stauth assert that having a purpose for which to live is an influential factor in our happiness. In fact, they call it one of the three most important elements of life, along with health and relationships. Having that spiritual connection with God causes us to reach for a purpose that is greater than we are; it's a matter of loving what we do and knowing that it matters, regardless of our job or role in life.

Dr. Ron Jensen, in his book *Make a Life, Not Just a Living*, cites the 19th Century Polish poet Cyprian Norwid who wrote, "To be what is called happy, one should have (1) something to live on, (2) something to live for, (3) something to die for." Jensen also refers to something Martin Seligman, a University of Pennsylvania researcher, says about finding meaning in life. It demands, according to Seligman, "an attachment to something larger than the lonely self." That spiritual dimension is the grounding, the foundation of true happiness.

For me, our faith helps us to be happy in other ways, too, because it causes us to move outside ourselves and offer ourselves to others. Many of us are prone to a lot of 'navel gazing,' and recounting all the things that are wrong with us and in our lives; we become totally self-absorbed, and self-absorbed people are usually a long way from being happy. Sure, we've all had a rough childhood, and sure, some things aren't perfect in our lives, but that's just the way it is, and it doesn't get better by focusing on that and nothing else.

We have to get beyond our "stuff," and reach out to help others. A part of being happy entails

using our strengths in the service of "something larger" than ourselves. That means helping someone else, because just as soon as we move the focus away from ourselves and toward others, we will find a deeper sense of satisfaction and happiness.

After first service, Gerry Fortner (in the parking lot at Beef and Boards) gave me a quote that he had on the board all the years that he was a teacher. It said, "Happiness is sharing with and caring about others." According to Baker and Stauth, "Studies show that happy people are altruistic, and that altruistic people are happy." Giving of ourselves to others gets us outside our problems, our fears and self-absorption. It shifts our focus.

And there is a bonus for us: giving to others increases our own happiness. Now that isn't the reason to give; we give out of a genuine depth of happiness that causes us to be concerned for and want to help others, but there is personal benefit that comes from it.

I've mentioned Dan Baker several times this morning. He is the director of the Life Enhancement Program at Canyon Ranch near Tucson in Arizona. In his book *What Happy People Know*, he tells story after story of persons who have come to the ranch seeking happiness. Because of his 30 years of experience, he's come up with some tools that he believes can help us find happiness. The first is appreciation: the process of valuing that which is good and right in our lives. The second is the power to choose. This reminds me of what Victor Frenkl, a survivor of the Holocaust concentration camps said—that the only choice those in the camp had was to choose their attitude toward what they were going through. They couldn't choose anything else, but they could choose that..

Another of the happiness tools is personal which has to do with taking responsibility and taking action. This is what keeps us from becoming a victim, because we realize that our lives belong to us, not to anyone else. And yet a fourth tool in the book is learning to know our strengths and to lead with them. We've talked about the importance of focusing on our strengths rather than our weaknesses in the past, and suffice it to say that that is precisely one of the ways we can find greater satisfaction and happiness.

There's another tool that the authors name and it's the power of language and stories. When it comes to our language and stories, they assert that we tend to see the world we describe. That's another way of saying that the stories and the words we use to tell them say a lot about our world. How can we choose more positive, hope-filled and faithful ways to describe our world? That's certainly something to think about.

The last of the happiness tools has to do with multidimensional living. The challenge for many of us is not putting all our energy just into one area of our lives. For many of us, that all too often tends to be our work, but the rest of our lives—our health, our relationships and more—need attention as well. Rather than being just a one-dimensional being, we might focus on broadening the scope of our lives. Multidimensional living is really living a full and complete life.

The writers sum it all up with these words: "Happiness is a way of life—an overriding outlook composed of qualities such as optimism, courage, love and fulfillment...It is nothing less than cherishing every day."

So let me ask you—how is your happiness quotient?

Prayer: Linda

Our loving God, you know us, and you know the stories of our lives. In reality, there's nothing we can share with you that you don't already know, so you're well aware of the struggle most of us have to be happy. We tend to go down a lot of roads searching for that which will fulfill our lives

and make us truly happy.

Forgive us, our God, for all the times we get so off-tracked trying to find that elusive quality called happiness. Forgive us when our endless drive hurts or neglects others; nudge us gently back on the right path, God, because we certainly miss it most of the time if left to our own devices.

Remind us, dear God, that happiness is not "out there" somewhere, but it right here-within us, because you are within us. Give us new eyes to see the world around us; fill us with a sense of hope for tomorrow; help us to know that we can trust in you, no matter what happens in our lives; give us the courage we need to step up to the plate and give life our best, and God, show each of us what our lives are about. Help us to find that sense of meaning and purpose that will cause us to know, really know, what happiness is.

Thank you, God, for this gift of life. Now help us live it—today and always.

Thanks for being the God who never fails us. Amen.

Closing:

There are so many dimensions to happiness that we couldn't begin to cover it all adequately. Writer Storm Jameson makes a stab at it with these words: "Happiness comes of the capacity to feel deeply, to enjoy simply, to think freely, to risk life, to be needed."

I'm convinced that God wants us to be happy; that's God's intent for our lives. Jesus understood that; Paul came to understand it; do we?

Have a good Sunday, and go in peace. Amen.