

The Pursuit of Happiness
July 5, 2009
The United Church of Gainesville
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Matthew 5:3-12 – The Beatitudes

We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all people 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. – That to secure these rights, Governments are instituted among People, deriving their just powers from the consent of the governed, – That whenever any Form of Government becomes destructive of these ends, it is the Right of the people to alter or to abolish it, and to institute new Government, laying its foundations on such principles and organizing its powers in such form as to them shall seem most likely to effect their Safety and Happiness. Prudence indeed, will dictate that Governments long established should not be changed for light and transient causes. . . . But when a long train of abuses and usurpations, pursuing invariably the same Object evinces a design to reduce them under absolute Despotism, it is their right, it is their duty, to throw off such Government, and to provide new Guards for their future security.

I am struck again by the remarkable quality of the Declaration of Independence. First there is the affirmation of the right and duty of a people to engage in revolution when the nation's leadership neglects and abuses their rights. Never to be taken lightly, revolution is part of our roots. It's in our political DNA. I am often surprised that as a nation we are not more understanding and supportive of revolutionary movements around the world.

Second there is this marvelous sentence in the Declaration of Independence, almost scriptural in its quality, "We hold these truths to be self-evident, that all people 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."

Today I want to explore an authentic way to engage in the pursuit of happiness - culturally, politically, and spiritually.

I started thinking of the meaning of the pursuit of happiness when I read a remarkable essay “What Makes Us Happy?” by Joshua Shenk in the June edition of *Atlantic* magazine*. Shenk analyzes a 72 year long landmark Harvard study of 268 men who entered college in the late 1930’s that continues gathering data today. It is probably the longest running and most exhaustive study of mental and physical health in history. It’s got severe limits – the subjects are all men, all starting out as well adjusted Harvard types. But its sheer scope, following its subjects through World War II, marriages, divorces, professional successes and failures, and then into retirement, makes it uniquely valuable. While the files remain anonymous, they are said to include U.S. Senators, a best selling novelist, a presidential cabinet member, Ben Bradlee, editor of the Washington Post, and evidently, John F. Kennedy.

Shenk opens his article citing a case study that followed a certain man into his 80’s, a man who hardly spent a day in the hospital, stayed married for over 60 years with a marriage he rated as a 9 on a 1-9 scale (nine being perfect), a man who would not change anything in his life.

Then he switches to the conclusion of a quite different life: The study end, “You literally fell down drunk and died. Not quite what the study had in mind.”

What, Shenk asks, can this study teach us about happiness from these two extremes and all those who were someplace in between?

The study’s original premise was that medical and psychological research paid too much attention to sick people, exploring life through symptoms and diseases. This study sought to understand how one lives well.

One common theme in the study is that the men in it began with great opportunity. One respondent said he saw his life like that of the three servants in the biblical parable of the talents. Given much, he felt a responsibility to risk those talents in a rich and giving life. This particular subject however, began drinking in his thirties, had a disastrous affair, was unable to settle down, and died of a sudden disease.

President John F. Kennedy may have personified the typical subject of this study. Everything about him was paradoxical. He came from a ruthless family of privilege and ambition that had amassed great power but also suffered unspeakable tragedy. Publically he was the personification of wit and youthful vigor. Yet privately he was a philanderer suffering a debilitating illness. He embodied an ideal “Camelot” moment in America which inspired acts of service and social justice, yet shadows of duplicity always lurked in his life. Kennedy’s example showed the researchers that no life could be categorized into simple yes and no’s of happiness or success.

In response to this study, George Valliant, who has overseen it for the last 42 years, identified seven major factors to predict a long and healthy life, both physically and psychologically, plus one parallel trait that affects all seven.

The first he calls mature adaptation. Adaptation is how we experience and change our life according to the obstacles we face. The tragedies and triumphs of life don't shape us as much as how we learn from and respond to those inevitable ups and downs. People who get stuck at any stage, whether a high of youthful success or a low of mid-life crisis, become brittle, physically and emotionally.

Second is education. Some level of higher education combined with social and physical factors preserves mental alertness in old age.

Third is a stable marriage or partnership. Fourth is not smoking. Fifth is not abusing alcohol. Sixth, exercise. Seventh, maintaining a healthy weight.

Of the men who had five or six of these factors in their fifties, half ended up at age 80 as happy and well and only 7.5% as sad or sick. On the other hand, of the men who had three or fewer of these factors at age fifty, none ended up reporting being happy or well at 80.

While remarkable in their outcome, these factors seem pretty obvious. But there is that one over arching element that runs parallel to these seven factors. That is the power of relationship. More important than IQ, family background or anything else, the greatest predictor of a long and happy life is the ability to sustain relationships. Being single, by the way does not mean one does not have sustained social relationships. Relationship means being connected to others on a deep and continuing level. To do this involves accepting life's pains and promises, humility, the ability to forgive others and grow from one's own mistakes, and an openness to give to others.

How then does this relate to us as a spiritual community?

I am going to read a passage from the gospel of Matthew known as the beatitudes. The word beatitude has come to mean blessedness, because each of these pronouncements begins in our most familiar translations with the word blessed. But the root word also means happiness, a state of well being and joy. In fact the Buddhist concept of Nirvana, the enlightenment by which one escapes the cycle of life, death and reincarnation is also defined as beatitude. This list of beatitudes begins what is known as the Sermon on the Mount, probably the core of Jesus' moral code and parables. It's found in chapter 5:3-12.

The setting of the mountain in Matthew is meant to remind people of Moses bringing the Ten Commandments from Mt. Sinai. Two translations, the Good News Bible of the American Bible Society, and the Jerusalem Bible, actually translated first to French and then English, give the beatitudes an interesting twist. Instead of beginning each phrase with "Blessed are..." They begin "How happy are..." Listen to the beatitudes as I read them from the Jerusalem bible.

How happy are the poor in spirit; theirs is the kingdom of heaven.
Happy the gentle: (or lowly or meek, or a person of peace) they shall have the earth for their heritage.
Happy those who mourn; they shall be comforted.
Happy those who hunger and thirst for what is right: they shall be satisfied.
Happy the merciful: they shall have mercy shown them.
Happy the pure in heart: they shall see God.
Happy the peacemakers: they shall be called children of God.
Happy are those who are persecuted in the cause of right: theirs is the kingdom of heaven.

Aren't these definitions of happiness – mourners, poor in spirit, the gentle or lowly, those who struggle for the right – seemingly contradictory? I believe they reflect what George Valliant describes as mental adaptation, addressing pain and struggle and learning from them.

These beatitudes participate in the yin and yang of life rather than try to buy happiness through acquisition and achievement as the typical American dream has defined it. Much of the American culture's dream of happiness is symbolized as rugged individualism, the freedom to get what we want when we want it for ourselves. This is embodied in every "Best Buy" advertisement. The kind of happiness revealed in the beatitudes is worked out in community, and true community, as Rita Nakashima Brock, is the container for both our joy and sorrow. We can't have one without the other. Without the container of community, sorrow is simply sadness that spills out of the counter onto the floor and never finds its depth. Without the container, joy is simply narcissism that never finds its source outside itself. True community embodies the paradoxes of the beatitudes in the pursuit of happiness.

Furthermore, the pursuit of happiness in community means opening ourselves to the pain and promise of the constantly unfolding nature of truth. After all, Jefferson wrote, "all **men** are created equal." He didn't have a clue that he needed to include women in the vision. Second, he owned slaves. Either he didn't have the wisdom or he didn't have the courage to make sure their equality was recognized in the founding of this country. We must be aware that there will always be arenas of life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness tomorrow to which we are blind today. Opening our blind eyes to new truth is never easy. This country has gone through the pain and promise of recognizing that women are equal and entitled to the same rights as men. This country has gone through the pain and promise of recognizing that people of color are equal and entitled to the same rights as whites.

Today the true American dream will not be realized until it accepts that gay, lesbian, and bi-sexual people are equal to straight America and thus equally deserving of life, liberty and the pursuit of happiness. To my

mind this includes the unalienable right afforded every other loving couple in America of being legally married.

One of my favorite stickers in Bill Lassiter's display in the library last week says, "If gays get equal rights, then everybody will want them." Well, Amen to that too.

So on this Fourth of July weekend celebration, let us remember three things. First, remember the remarkable courage and vision of our founders in dissolving their relationship with a government that did not recognize their rights. Second, remember their vision, of the truest and deepest happiness that comes in a community of equality, where there is never truly peace and justice for any until there is peace and justice for all. Third, remember that the dream of happiness through equality is by its nature is always unfolding.

I believe all of us have been and are being transformed by God, in and among each other, through this community of faith. I stand with you and ask that we be open to continued transformation, that together we may find the happiness and blessedness, as the beatitudes of Jesus proclaim:

of our poverty,
of our gentleness,
of our grief,
of our hunger for what is right,
of our mercy, of the purity of our hearts,
of our desire for peace,
and even of the pain we suffer to do what is good.

(*Besides the June, 2009 *Atlantic* article by Joshua Shenk, "What Makes us Happy?" the following articles also served as resources for this sermon. *Time Magazine*, June 22, 09 "A User's Guide to Good Health at Every Age," Rosanne Leipzig, *Christian Century*, May 19, 2009, "Choosing Community," Gregory Boyd, *Charles Schwab – On Investing Magazine*, Summer 2009, "What Makes for a Happy Retirement"

Prayer –

O Creator of visions who somehow through the wisdom of faith unfettered by dogma instilled a hope for goodness and a dream of happiness in the founders of this nation,
we open our hearts this moment to you in our hopes for happiness,
seeing these hopes surrounding us like the evening stars, shining on us like the growing moon.

Let the evening lights bathe us, each other in this church, friends and family beyond this sanctuary, and our nation in beauty and healing.
Let us trust in happiness, like we trust that dropping a letter in a mail box or pushing "send" on an e-mail will send our thoughts to their intended destination...

Let us trust that our lives will be faithfully delivered to their dreams, even though we can't tell exactly where they are going, and that the way may never be too lonely.

Gathered by yesterday's spirits and tomorrow's promises, let us join our hearts and words in trust. Amen.