

Happy To Be Here

A sermon by Jackie Clement

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When I was a hospital chaplain in Boston, I had an encounter that involved a humorous miscommunication, but which, at the same time, was not at all funny. On rounds one day, I met a young man who was very worried about what the afterlife might bring. He had recently joined a conservative and evangelical Christian church, and was told that all the torments of eternal hellfire would be his unless he adhered to a strict doctrinal code. He felt that he had little chance of avoiding hell, and was sincerely terrified of what would happen to him. I could tell that he had a vivid picture in his mind of what he would endure and he was indeed tormented in the present moment. The Christianity I was raised in taught that, while hell was a real possibility, if we strove to live a good life by following the teachings of Jesus our transgressions would be forgiven and we would be saved. So I asked this young man, “Are you living a good life?” meaning (in my head though not apparently in my words), “Are you living according to the teachings your church says will lead to salvation?” “No,” he responded. “I don’t have a girlfriend and I want to have a house and better car.”

It’s a mistake our society often makes, confusing the good life with *a* good life. We are quick to equate things like material wealth, social standing, power, and fame, with a good life, and there is no doubt that a certain amount of those things contribute to our welfare, but is that really the aim of your life? Or is your definition of a good life different than what is commonly called living the good life? I invite you to consider what it means to you to live a good life. What is the purpose of human life? How do we achieve it? Is it the same for everyone? So many more questions spring to mind. Today, I want to consider the goal of human existence, what philosophers would call the capital ‘G’ Good or end of human life.

That same childhood church that assured me of the possibility of salvation taught that it was personal salvation that was the ultimate goal. Judaism teaches that it is the salvation of the community, the healing of the world, that is our greatest Good. Islam teaches that the greatest attainment of humanity is perfect submission to God’s will, and others would say our end purpose is to glorify God. And I would ask you, “What is it you want most for your life? What is it you would want most for your children’s lives?”

Aristotle, who filled 10 books considering the ultimate human good in his *Nicomachean Ethics*, said that to be the true good it had to be whole and sufficient in itself, that is it had to be one thing that in itself was enough. Further, it could not be a means to something else, but the final goal – the highest and most unified end. Aristotle concluded that happiness was that highest good, that human life’s ultimate good was to be happy. For “both the multitude and persons of refinement speak of it as Happiness,” he wrote.

He was not the first and certainly not the last philosopher to conclude that happiness was the highest good. We may not think of the German philosopher Goethe, illuminated by the flickering flames of a Faustian hell, as a great proponent of happiness, but here is what he wrote:

...all truly clever people will discover and remain convinced that the moment is all, and that the excellence of the rational person is to behave so that his life, insofar as it depends on himself, contains the greatest possible quantity of rational, happy moments.

But you don't have to be a philosopher to arrive at the same answer. I grant you it took me several readings of *The Nicomachean Ethics* to be really sure I got what Aristotle was saying and I needed Julie to interpret the totality of Goethe for me, but this morning's reading from the Dalai Lama couldn't be any clearer.

I believe that the purpose of life is to be happy. From the moment of birth, every human being wants happiness and does not want suffering. Neither social conditioning nor education nor ideology affect this. From the very core of our being, we simply desire contentment.

And what does the founding document of this nation say, but that we are endowed with certain inalienable rights and “*that among these are life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness?*”

Peter Gomes, chaplain at Harvard University for more than 30 years regularly asked the parents of Harvard students what they wanted for their children. Here are students at one of the most academically rigorous and most prestigious universities in the world, and did the people footing the lofty tuition hope their children would go on to honored careers, fame and wealth, to be the rich and powerful leaders of society? No, over a span of thirty years they regularly answered this: I want my child to be happy.

Sounds like we have some pretty good consensus going here. We want to be happy. But what is happiness? Until we know just what it is we are aiming at it will be hard to achieve, and it is surprisingly difficult to find a single definition, thus the confusion between living the good life and a good life. So, what is it to be happy?

The Oxford English dictionary defines it as “feeling or showing satisfaction or contentment.” The Merriam-Webster dictionary comes close saying it is “characterized by well-being or contentment.” Psychologists speak of a general sense of satisfaction and well being. Perhaps a definition that may resonate with more clearly with some comes from the Urban Dictionary which defines happiness as “A small metal hinged box with pointy edges, rapped with barbed-wire and hidden in a dark room full of electric eels, razorblades, piles of salt crystals with fans behind them and random pools of lemon juice.” As in, “I heard Bob died looking for happiness.” Indeed, happiness can sometimes seem to be an unattainable ideal. But the definitions with which I connect most strongly are those from the people I've already quoted.

Aristotle wrote compellingly that happiness was more than fleeting pleasure, though that was certainly a desirable aspect. And before we go on the more, I want to take a moment to consider the pleasures of, well, pleasure. The first two drafts of this sermon almost wholly discounted pleasure, and then, on Friday night, we saw *Noises Off* at Community Players. It had no message,

no meaning, no deeper social consciousness, and it was hilarious. It fed my spirit. It was church at its best. I believe there is not only room, but need, for such pleasure in life's happiness. When our senses are most fully engaged with the sight of beauty, with hearing the music we most love, with tasting an exquisite meal, in laughing uproariously or deeply engaged in conversation it can have a more profound affect than the fleeting moment of engagement. Pleasure can change us. As I talked about in a service over the summer, the experience of beauty can connect us to the divine and compel us to want beauty for all people. So I do not discount pleasure, but, like Aristotle, neither do I see it as equal to true happiness.

Happiness for Aristotle was a fuller concept more akin to human flourishing. It was about living into our full potential beyond simple enjoyment of things that feel good in the moment. It's a concept that called for the use of reason in concert with moral and ethical values, what Aristotle called the "active exercise of [the] soul's faculties in conformity with excellence or virtue." Happiness for Aristotle, then, relies on the quality of your soul, and it requires practicing virtues such as friendliness, gentleness, honesty and generosity.

The Dalai Lama defines happiness as the ability to move through the world with a sense of equanimity and a heart at peace. He writes:

...I have found that the greatest degree of inner tranquility comes from the development of love and compassion... The more we care for the happiness of others, the greater our own sense of well-being becomes. Ultimately, the reason why love and compassion bring the greatest happiness is simply that our nature cherishes them above all else. The need for love lies at the very foundation of human existence. It results from the profound interdependence we all share with one another... True compassion is not just an emotional response but a firm commitment founded on reason.

So there are two definitions of happiness as something beyond simple pleasure, something that draws us into community in concern for other people's happiness and well being, something founded in reason and commitment rather than in the whim of the moment or because we happen to feel like it today.

But I would like to add another voice to these philosophical and religious ones. If Aristotle and the Dalai Lama are concerned with human flourishing, certainly the field of positive psychology is, as well. Positive psychology is the branch of psychology that deals with human potential, growth and fulfillment rather than in the treatment of mental illness. I suppose we have it to thank for the rash of self-help books in the world, but it is actually based in scientific method. Martin Seligman, professor of psychology at the University of Pennsylvania and former President of the American Psychological Association, is often credited with founding the field of positive psychology. In his book *Flourish*, Seligman describes a model of happiness that includes some of these same elements: positive emotion, engagement (or how deeply involved and engaged you are), how strong your relationships are in the world, the presence of meaning and purpose in life.

Inserted in your order of service this morning you will find a very simple quiz that comes from the field of positive psychology. Developed by Ed Diener at the U of I, it strives to measure what

Diener called Subjective Well Being or generally how satisfied you are with your life. You are invited to take it home and respond to the five simple statements about your contentment with life. Rate how strongly you agree with each statement from 1 meaning you strongly disagree to 7, meaning you strongly agree. Here are the statements:

_____ In most ways my life is close to my ideal.
1 means you strongly disagree, 7 means you strongly agree

_____ The conditions of my life are excellent.

_____ I am satisfied with my life.

_____ So far I have gotten the important things I want in life.

_____ If I could live my life over, I would

If you score in the top end of the range it indicates that you are, to varying degrees, satisfied with life. Lower scores indicate some level of dissatisfaction with life. But here's the thing. All the models of happiness we just considered include an element of personal human agency. They say that we are not simply hapless victims in the hands of emotionality but that we have some say so in crafting our own happiness. We will look at this concept in more depth next week, but no matter where your score fell, it need not be the final answer. If you are concerned that your level of satisfaction with life is not what you want it to be there are people who can help. I urge you to seek out someone you can speak with whether it is me or one of the other ministers, a friend, a spouse, your doctor or a counselor. We are all in this together and the well-being of one is connected to the well-being of all. This is a community where we take that seriously.

And that is, indeed, the second reason why these three definitions of happiness appeal to me, because they all include acknowledgment of our interdependence. Happiness is not an individual striving. It is a matter of community. The Dalai Lama explains it this ways, "...we are only one, whereas others are infinite in number. Thus, it can be clearly decided that others gaining happiness is more important than just yourself alone."¹ This idea of happiness calls us into community and demands of us ways of being in right relationship with each other not only for the sake of others' happiness but for our own. As my colleague Scott Alexander writes "this American inclination to believe that happiness can be found in personal isolation and covetousness must be unmasked as the dangerous bankruptcy it is."²

So what are your thoughts on happiness? Do you accept the assertion that it is the goal of human existence: universal, perfect in itself and sought for no other reason than itself? Or do you find it to be otherwise? Do any or all of these definitions fit for what you are trying to achieve in your life:

- active exercise of [the] soul's faculties in conformity with excellence or virtue.
- inner tranquility comes from the development of love and compassion...

¹ The Path to Tranquility, Chapter 1, January 15

² Alexander, Scott, sermon *But Are You Happy?*, <http://www.uua.org/worship/words/sermon/183421.shtml>

- being deeply engaged in relationships and activities that provide meaning, purpose and achievement

I circle back to where we started: What is it you want most for your life? What is it you would want most for your children's lives?" Over the next four months I want to look deeply into these questions. I want to consider not only what it is we want most from our lives, but how we might go about making that happen and hearing from those of you who have already made it happen. Let happiness be our guide as we consider the difference between the good life and a good life.

For this morning, let me conclude with a story from John Lennon. He wrote:

When I was 5 years old, my mom always told me that happiness was the key to life. When I went to school, they asked me what I wanted to be when I grew up. I wrote down 'happy.' They told me I didn't understand the assignment. I told them they didn't understand life.

Namaste. Por lo tanto puede ser.

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