

At the Corner of Happy, Healthy, and Holy sermon series

“The Pursuit of Happiness”

[Philippians 4:11-13](#)

Let us pray “May these words of my mouth and this meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer.” Amen.

Who among us would not appreciate a little more happiness in our life? Happiness seems to be the center piece of how we judge our day and life as a whole. When I’m standing in line at the grocery store and notice someone standing behind me, I might ask them “How are you doing?” And while I don’t mind hearing that there day has been a particularly difficult one filled with sadness, anger, or disappointment, most will simply say “pretty good, thanks,” not wanting to torment me or themselves while remembering their true state of affairs.

The concept of happiness has evolved considerably over time. During the Greco Roman period in which the gospels were written happiness carried with it an essence of being lucky. The Greek word *eudaimonia* can be translated to mean “good spirit.” In other words, a person said to be happy was blessed. By the 18th century, however, we find Thomas Jefferson writing about “the pursuit of happiness along with life and liberty as an unalienable right” in the Declaration of Independence. There is dispute about what Jefferson really meant when he wrote “pursuit of happiness” but the effect seems clear today. Since that time laypersons have gleefully read those words believing that happiness can be captured. The economic boom of the industrial revolution that followed shortly after solidified that belief and secularized the word happiness.

Today, nearly 250 years later, our gaze remains keenly fixed on the happiness just outside our reach. And if that weren’t distracting enough, we now seem to have developed a strong aversion to sadness and suffering. Just ask a parent, for example, what they want most for their children and they will nearly unanimously say that there on and only wish is for their health and happiness. Consider the implications of that condition. What would it look like if we only had happiness in our life?

To be anything but happy today is a sign of weakness or brokenness. In our day-to-day lives we are continuously exposed to messages suggesting that if we are feeling sad or depressed that there is something wrong with us. Think of the number of ads from pharmaceutical companies for antidepressants that you may have recently seen. These aren’t just useful messages for those who are truly racked with depression rooted in medical or neuro-psychological causes. They are also messages that we indiscriminately hear in our periods of legitimate sadness.

Through those ads we can easily see ourselves and our sadness and become confused; believing that to be sad is something to be fixed, that we are in some way sick. Those same ads can seductively offer us an escape from what are admittedly quite uncomfortable feelings. The allure of being happy, or at least not sad though modern science can be quite compelling. I personally find it curious how those ads also coin-

identally bracket the apocalyptic news we are exposed to on a daily basis and that drive us into greater sadness.

Perhaps just as interesting are the ads for a new TV, phone, car, food, and so many other products that use our emotions such as happiness to draw us in. The next time that you watch your favorite TV show pay attention to the commercials and notice how they play on your emotions using cute little puppies, adorable babies, or other heartwarming and uplifting scenes that leave you with a feeling of happiness attached to their product. Other companies such as Coca-Cola are even less subtle as they use the tagline “Open Happiness.” Our consumer driven culture thrives on our emotions and happiness is right at the top of the list. On one hand suggesting that our sadness is something bad and to be avoided. And on the other hand, telling us that they have just the solution in the form of a pharmaceutical, or product such as a car that is sure to make us feel better.

A Harris poll in 2017 suggested that only 33% of us rated our lives as being happy. And while I am somewhat reluctant to share that statistic with you as it categorizes and objectifies people, it does help to highlight the growing epidemic of major depression among teens and millennials.¹ It also helps in our understanding of the recent and dramatic increases in substance use disorders and suicide. These are real people, perhaps like you and me in many ways, but who have lost their way. They too sought happiness but out of circumstance ended up finding despair.

And so, we continue our pursuit of happiness knowing that the world we live in has made it more complicated. Is that true happiness just in front of me or some mirage artificially created?

As Christians, we can sometimes be exposed to contradictory messages about happiness that leave us confused and unsure how to relate to that feeling. On one hand there can be social pressures and even empirical research suggesting that as Christians we are a happy lot; living in a tent of eternal blessedness. And so, we may feel as though we must be happy even when we are suffering or in pain. On the other hand, we can encounter the Bible and its messages in way that suggests that true happiness is reserved for a time beyond the here and now. So, let me try to quickly clear up some of those confusing messages so that happiness might be encountered in a more holistic and authentic way.

Pain and suffering are indeed a terrible thing and while we might each find a special way to confront it none of us are obligated as Christians or anything else to disguise it as happiness. Our benefit as people of God is, however, that God may bring us spiritual comfort and compassion through our faith while potentially working through us in other healing ways.

At the same time let us not be misguided in our happiness in this earthly “kin-dom” that is here and now and not yet. Through our faith we are once again liberated from the yoke of sin. My heart soars with joy as I read from Luke the “good tidings to the poor; He has sent Me to bind up the brokenhearted, proclaim liberty for the captives, and freedom to the prisoners.” Allow those words to wash over your heart and feel the exuberant joy He proclaims for you and me. Through Him eternal happiness is ours. This is where everlasting happiness can be found, and it is of the kind that I want all of us to consider today.

¹ <https://www.bcbs.com/the-health-of-america/reports/major-depression-the-impact-overall-health>

When I refer to kinds of happiness as I just did it's important to recognize that happiness represents a state of affairs in relation to our health. In other words, happiness is a measure of our health. And what does it mean to be truly healthy? To answer that question, we need to dissect our humanity. If I were to slice through our humanity and open it up you would see three distinct but interconnected parts: which we will call the mind, body, and soul.

As it turns out, each of the three are subject illness and so we should be concerned about their health. You may recall from last week pastor Ouk-Yean talked about body health. For us to be completely healthy all three parts need to be in optimum condition. When you ask me for example "how are you doing?" I shouldn't just consider my emotional state and tell you "I'm doing fine, thanks." I'd like to suggest instead that we consider all parts of life and share how things are going based on that. As a matter of fact, I'd like to invite all of us to become interpreters. Here is the new language that I'd like to teach you. Whenever you hear someone ask you or anyone else around you "how are you doing," I'd like for you to translate that into "how is it with you and your soul?" And as part of that mental exercise take a moment to reflect on it and your state of affairs with all parts of yourself, your body, mind, and soul. Think of this as an exercise that can build up your spiritual strength and happiness.

We know when we feel emotionally happy and we even physically good but what about spiritual happiness? John Wesley would often start his small group meetings with the question "How is it with your soul?" And if I were to do the same and ask you "How is it with your soul," how might you respond? When I first heard and considered that question back in seminary I froze in panic. It is a seemingly simple question, yet the answer can be both rich, and complicated so please don't panic. To answer it however we might reflect on a couple simple questions such as: where is Christ in my life right now and been throughout my day; how did I become separated from Him, if I was; in what ways do I feel especially connected and joyful? I'm guessing that you might get the basic idea.

Just think about how Christ is in your life, or not, and why. In this moment, standing before you and sharing this message I'm feeling very connected to Him; and so, my soul feels abundant right now. I invite you to think about not only making this a question that you ask yourself throughout the day but also for those in your life. This simple practice can serve as a gentle but caring reminder of Christ at work in your life. There are many other things that we can do to support our spiritual health and happiness, but perhaps highest on that list is prayer; be intentional and make it part of a practice throughout your day.

When a person losses sight or favors one or two parts of the mind-body-soul humanness their overall health is very likely to suffer. Not only would their life be out balance and fragile, but it would also lack resilience. To better understand this let's imagine together that a person had only focused on their emotional well-being. And then one day their world fell apart through a calamity of circumstances. Consequently, their emotional state takes a nose dive and neither their physical or spiritual pieces are strong enough to buttress that period of emotional distress. Think about a time when you've been physically ill or in emotionally turmoil and how your faith has been there to support you. This is why its so very crucial for each of us to be good stewards towards all aspects of our health. Through that diligence we are much more likely to experience happiness.

It might be helpful for us to envision this as a wheel with three spokes where each segment describes a particular kind of happiness. If one of those kinds of happiness is stronger or weaker than the other the wheel might become out of round and not roll well. Our life might be bumpy. It is our job to keep that wheel in balance by continuously monitoring our happiness in those three categories. The thought of doing this might sound more like work and contrary to happiness itself but it will ultimately become quite second nature.

Before I move on, I'd like share one final thought in relation to what was just shared as it might have relevance to some of us here today. Our bodies can fail us in many different and long-lasting ways not withstanding aging; making physical health and happiness less of a resource during times of emotional or spiritual distress. This realization underscores the importance of nurturing both emotional and spiritual resources during those times.

These thoughts highlight how spiritual health is uniquely different from the health of the mind and body. The uncertainties of life can reveal the health vulnerabilities of both the mind and body. We have little or no control over what emotional trauma, illness or disease that might befall us. However, spiritual health and the joy that flows from it is under no such influence except our own desire to pursue it. Spiritual health is the one thing that we count on always and forever. Romans 5 closes with the words, "because the love of God has been poured out within our hearts through the Holy Spirit who was given to us," we can know that this is true.

If we return to the idea of dissecting our humanity by slicing it along yet another axis, we can see the way in which we experience it in relation to self and also the world. This concept might be a little abstract and so to be clear let me illustrate it by example. On a daily basis I try to spend about thirty minutes near the end of my day reading scripture and journaling on it. It has taken some work on my part to make it a habit. More recently, however, I began noticing how I was feeling quite uplifted after that process. I was finding God within myself. In contrast we can also experience spiritual fulfillment from the outer world as well; finding God in our neighbor. To illustrate this idea let me share a story that I recently came across.

“There was an anthropologist who had been studying the habits and culture of a remote African tribe. He had been working in the village for quite some time and the day before he was to return home, he put together a gift basket filled with delicious fruits from around the region and wrapped it in a ribbon. He placed the basket under a tree and then he gathered up the children in the village.”

“The man drew a line in the dirt, looked at the children, and said, ‘When I tell you to start, run to the tree and whoever gets there first will win the basket of the fruit.’ When he told them to run, they all took each other’s hands and ran together to the tree. Then they sat together around the basket and enjoyed their treat as a group.

The anthropologist was shocked. He asked why they would all go together when one of them could have won all the fruits for themselves? A young girl looked up at him and said, “How can one of us be happy if all the other ones are sad?”

Years later, the well-known South African activist Desmond Tutu would describe the little girl's thought process by using the word ubuntu, which means "I am because we are." He went on to say

"Africans have a thing called ubuntu. We believe that a person is a person through other persons. That my humanity is caught up, bound up, inextricably, with yours. When I dehumanize you, I dehumanize myself. The solitary human being is a contradiction in terms. Therefore, you seek to work for the common good because your humanity comes into its own in community, in belonging."

This story clearly and beautifully describes another important source of happiness that we can find through our connections with others. Take a moment to deeply reflect on that idea while thinking about the messages of love, compassion, and grace that we find in the gospels. Without question, God wishes for us to be spiritually happy. That spiritual happiness, however, is not simply found through our worship of God's divine persona but instead through all parts of God, seen and unseen. 1 John 4:12 writes "No one has ever seen God; but if we love one another, God lives in us and his love is made complete in us." It is through our loving relationships with the other, with our neighbor, that we move ever closer to God and sanctification. This is the living Body of Christ of one mind and spirit. Our spiritual health and happiness is not simply a product of our individual mind, body, and soul but also the way that each of us are one within the larger community of Christ.

My siblings in Christ when I first started outlining this sermon, I thought that I'd pivot around the impossibility of pursuing happiness, and then God worked through me; saying I have something better for you to share. It is true that we can create conditions and even intentions for our emotional and physical happiness. We can focus more on the present moment, building a strong network of friends, exercise, eating well, and many other things yet in the end we remain at the unpredictability of life. The tribulations of living under such circumstances could send many into a depressive state and abandon any attempt or care for emotional, and physical health. Yet all of that can be quieted and happiness raised through the pursuit of a spirituality built around faith in Christ.

God's Spirit makes us loving, happy, peaceful, patient, kind, good, faithful.²

Amen.

² Galatians 5:22