



“What Makes You Happy?”

John 12:20-33

Sermon Preached by Gregory Knox Jones

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What makes you happy? Overseas travel? Playing golf? Walking down the beach watching the dolphins play in the waves? What gives you a feeling of joy and a sense of well being? Pushing a trowel down into the soil and planting seeds in your garden? Listening to your favorite music? A candlelight dinner with your loved one?

Each of us can list things that make us happy, but did you know that science can actually measure your happiness using an MRI? The test measures the relative activation of the left prefrontal cortex versus the right prefrontal cortex. By doing this, it's possible to rate your degree of happiness.¹

Of course, we do not always need to rely on an MRI; we can spot people who are happy. Although, some fool us, don't they? Some have become adept at displaying outward signs that mislead us. Since the MRI measures what is going on in a person's brain, not the visual display, it confirms that it's not necessarily the person who smiles the most or has the hardest laugh. Some people put on clever disguises to cover up the turmoil within them. Some plaster on a wide grin to hold back the tears that are on the verge of erupting.

When I first read about the scientific ability to peer into our brains and measure our happiness, I immediately became curious as to how I might stack up against others. If everyone in our church family were tested I wonder how we would compare with each other? We have some pretty happy people in our faith community. Most likely, you can quickly bring to mind some who are upbeat and always focused on the positive. You may also envision others who, regardless of how wonderful the situation, can be counted on to warn us of the looming disaster.

Here's what I'd really like to know. I'd like to find out how I stack up against Matthieu Ricard. He is the happiest man ever measured and his degree of happiness far surpasses everyone else science has tested. Ricard has a doctorate in molecular genetics, he is an author and photographer, and is a Buddhist monk who lives in Nepal.

What do you suspect Ricard was thinking when he was measured crowned king of happiness? By happiness, I do not mean simply a pleasant emotion that will pass once circumstances change. I'm referring to something deeper and more lasting. Happiness is a vague word; Ricard prefers the term “well-being,” which he describes as a deep sense of serenity and fulfillment. It is a sense of contentment that pervades despite the roller coaster of emotions we experience.

Before I tell you what was on Ricard's mind, think for a moment what *you* would concentrate on if you were being measured. What brings a smile not only to your face, but also to your heart? You will not be asked to share your thoughts publicly, so let your mind go wherever you wish. Hold that thought.

At first glance, it may seem there is a monumental disconnect between happiness and this morning's text from the Gospel of John. Our passage says that some Greeks – that is, Gentiles – come to Jesus to see what he's all about and to hear his teachings. Jesus responds by talking about death; his death and our death. He talks about *losing* your life, even *hating* your life. Is there any possible connection to happiness?

Jesus says, “Very truly, I tell you, unless a grain of wheat falls into the earth and dies, it remains just a single grain; but if it dies, it bears much fruit.” This veiled comment foretells that Jesus will be crucified, but it will not be the end. His death and resurrection will bear much fruit in that a new community – a new body of Christ – will be born. And by connecting this miniature parable of the seed dying with the saying: “Those who love their life lose it, and those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life,” indicates that Jesus intends for his metaphor about the seed dying to serve as a double entendre. Not only does it refer to his upcoming death, but is a basic principle of life. Until we die – that is, until we crucify our self-centered focus – we cannot experience the rich life that comes from giving ourselves for the good of another.

Jesus calls on us to die to self-centeredness. He wants us to let go of our self-preoccupation, so that we can tread the path that leads to an abundant life. St. Francis of Assisi knew this principle well when he wrote in his famous prayer for peace; “it is in giving that we receive; it is in dying that we are born again.”

Some are puzzled, if not disturbed, when they hear Jesus say, “Those who hate their life in this world will keep it for eternal life.” If you are unaware that Jesus regularly used shocking hyperboles to drive home his point, you might think he was encouraging self-hatred. We can be certain that is not the case because we interpret all that he says through a particular prism. When asked, “What is the greatest commandment?” Jesus responded: “You are to love God with your heart, soul, mind and strength; and a second is like it, you are to love your neighbor as yourself.” Love God, love your neighbor, and love yourself.

Back to Matthieu Ricard. What was he thinking when he measured off the charts on happiness? It was not a warm chocolate brownie with ice cream. He was mediating on compassion.

Focusing on personal pleasure will certainly move you further up the charts than thinking about routine tasks; but if you really want to zoom up the happiness scale, where you have a deep sense of well-being and satisfaction, the best booster rocket is compassion.

Compassion does not always come naturally in a culture that encourages competition and trumpets individualism. If we are simply hard-wired for survival of the fittest, isn't it natural for us to be selfish and to pursue what we think is in our own best interest?

Scholar Karen Armstrong points out that our old brain was bequeathed to us by reptiles that struggled into existence 500 million years ago. Desperate to survive, “these creatures were motivated by what the neuroscientists describe as feeding, fighting, fleeing and reproducing... Homo sapiens inherited these neurological systems...However, human beings evolved a ‘new brain,’ the neocortex that enables us to reflect on the world and on ourselves. It has made us into creatures who need meaning to be fulfilled...Our brain has evolved to be caring [and to push us not only to be competitive, but also cooperative.]¹

Jesus knew that human beings possess certain innate characteristics beyond those passed down to us by reptiles. We hunger for freedom. We have a natural revulsion toward injustice. What brings us into harmony with the universe is compassion toward others. All of the great spiritual leaders of the world's religions name compassion as the path to happiness and peace. Each major religious tradition has something akin to the Golden Rule: Treat others the way you wish to be treated. This maxim dates back to at least 500 B.C.

In his ministry of healing, in his welcoming of those whose lives were broken and in his teachings to his followers, Jesus underscored the importance of compassion. He taught that God abounds with compassion toward us and that we are to be compassionate with each other.

The word “compassion.” derives from a Latin word that means to “suffer with another” or “bear a burden with another.” It is to feel another’s pain as if it were our own and is illustrated by the proverb to walk in another person’s shoes.

To be compassionate does *not* mean that we constantly allow other people’s agendas to drive our lives or that we never engage in self-care. It does not mean we exhaust ourselves trying to fix others. Matthieu Ricard is a model of happiness because he has removed himself from the center of the universe, while not giving up the things that feed his soul. He’s found the right balance. He writes books that are intended to help others, but he also gains great satisfaction from writing and getting published. He loves photography so he carves out time to take pictures. However, at his core is a fundamental feeling of compassion toward others. It guides all he does. He does not imagine himself locked in competition with people. He does not view strangers with distrust. He does not approach others with the notion that he must win them over to his point of view. He does not search for flaws in others in order to pass judgment. He is generous in his view of others, he wants them to thrive and he reaches out with loving kindness.

Krista Tippett suggests a surprising name when talking about compassion – Albert Einstein. We know him as one of the most brilliant persons to ever walk this earth; the one who came up with $E = mc^2$. Did you know that when the great African American opera singer, Marian Anderson, went to Princeton to sing, he invited her to stay in his home because the best hotel in town was segregated and she wasn’t welcome there? Did you know that he used his celebrity status to speak out for the political prisoners in Europe and to advocate for the Scottsboro boys in the American South?

“Einstein believed that science should transcend national and ethnic divisions. But he watched physicists and chemists become the purveyors of weapons of mass destruction and he said that science had become like a razor blade in the hands of a three-year-old. Einstein said that as we grow more technologically advanced, we need the virtues of our spiritual traditions more than ever.”¹

We are much more than a mass of selfish, competitive impulses. We care about the plight of one another.

Dr. Armstrong says that “if you saw a child poised perilously on the edge of a well, you would immediately lunge forward to save her. Your action is not inspired by self-interest; you would not pause to ascertain whether or not she was related to you would not be motivated by the desire to win the admiration of your friends...There would be no time for such calculation; you would simply feel her plight in your gut and respond. There would be something disturbingly wrong with anyone who watched the child fall to her death without a flicker of unease. Fire fighters rush into burning houses to rescue people who are entirely unknown to them and we have all heard stories of people who put their own lives at risk while saving a total stranger who was drowning.”⁴

It is not necessary to have our skulls examined to see how we measure up to Matthieu Ricard. Christ shows us the way to a life of joy and fulfillment – extending compassion to others. We do not have to try to become St. Francis or Mother Teresa or Mahatma Gandhi. We simply need to show others the respect, the understanding and the kindness that we desire for ourselves.

NOTES:

1. Chade-Meng Tan, “Everyday Compassion at Google,” on TED.com, April 2011.
2. Karen Armstrong, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, (New York: Anchor Books, 2010), pgs. 12-19.

3. Krista Tippett, "Reconnecting With Compassion" on TED.com.
4. Karen Armstrong, *Twelve Steps to a Compassionate Life*, p.21.