

Never Take Direct Aim

We've talked on recent Sundays about happiness, a word that won't easily sit still for definition. Some equate it with good health, others with challenging work and financial security, still others with rewarding friendships. If you can tolerate another of those genie-in-a-bottle stories, here is one that illustrates how not everyone has the same idea of what it takes to be happy: Three men are sailing in the Pacific when their ship is wrecked and they find themselves on a lonely island. They have plenty of food, but their lives become different in every way from what they had known before. They have been there several months when one day, walking by the shore, they find an old seaweed-encrusted bottle. One man picks it up, and as he begins to rub and clean it, the inevitable genie pops out and says, "Thank you, and since you've been good enough to release me, I will grant one wish to each one of you."

The first man says, "Oh, that's great news! I'm the Chief Executive Officer of a Fortune 500 company, and I wish I were back in my office in Seattle." And so, Poof! He is back on the west coast. The second man says, "I'm a stockbroker from New York, and I would give anything to be back at my job." The words are barely out of his mouth before he is back in Manhattan surrounded by phones, clients and computers. The third man had adjusted to the quiet, slow island life better than the others, and had come to enjoy it. "Actually, I'm quite happy here," he said to the genie. "I just wish my two friends were back." Poof! Poof!

With so many different notions about how to find happiness, all I can do is share some of them and hope a few are useful. The first one expands on an idea mentioned earlier in this series — that if you hope for happiness you never make it a primary goal, or, as the sermon title says, you never take direct aim. One of the most brilliant men of modern times found that out the hard way, but before you hear him speak let me tell you something about the way he grew up.

Born into a highly intellectual family as the first of nine children, John Stuart Mill became the educational project of a father who taught him Greek at age three, Latin and arithmetic at eight, logic at twelve, economic theory at 13. Fluent in both Greek and Latin, the child prodigy had read the classical literature required at Oxford and Cambridge by the time he was ten, and delighted his parents by amazing their friends who came to visit. As I read parts of Mill's *Autobiography* last week, his lack of the normal childhood joys made me remember one of John Wesley's solemn resolutions. The founder of Methodism vowed "to labour after continual seriousness, not willingly indulging in any the least levity of behaviour, or in laughter; no, not for a moment." That strikes me as a terrible way to live but Wesley, at least, was old enough to make his own choice of such an unbalanced life. John Stuart Mill had it chosen **for** him, and with so little childhood gaiety to strike a balance his intense no-nonsense education took its toll. By age 20 he was deeply depressed and on the verge of a nervous breakdown. What is vital to my point this morning is what he had to say about happiness after he recovered. Listen carefully:

“Those only are happy who have their minds fixed on some object other than their own happiness; on the happiness of others, on the improvement of mankind, even on some art or pursuit, followed not as a means but as [an end in itself]. Aiming thus at something else, they find happiness by the way.” He makes that “by the way” sound almost like an afterthought, and that is exactly what he meant. “Ask yourself whether you are happy,” he says, “and you cease to be so.”

Another way to put it, in harmony with what some of you do each Fall in Kansas, is to say that finding happiness is analogous to hunting quail, from which the most vital lesson is that once your dog flushes a bird into flight you never aim directly at it, or you miss. Over and over, the wisest have said it is like that with happiness: talk too much about it, make it your chief goal, take direct aim....and it escapes you. Comparing it with that once-burned stuff used in steel mills, Aldous Huxley put it this way: “Happiness is like coke....something you get as a by-product in the process of making something else.” And our old friend of *The Scarlet Letter*, Nathaniel Hawthorne had still another image for expressing the same conviction: “Happiness is like a butterfly which, when pursued, is always just beyond your grasp, but which, if you will sit down quietly, may alight upon you.”

All of that seems to fit a conclusion reached by *Life* magazine some years ago after a roundtable discussion to identify the kinds of people who are really happy. These three were typical: a craftsman busy at his work, a mother bathing her child, a surgeon called at midnight to perform a critical operation. The one thing

they all had in common is that not one of them was aiming at being happy. Their joy came as a bonus, even in some cases as a bit of a surprise. Lowell Thomas had this in mind when he said that maybe the reason he had been so happy was because he had been so busy. “Those who sit around wondering if they are happy,” he said, “seldom are, while those who are happy will likely respond to questions by saying, ‘I hadn’t thought much about it.’”

If happiness is always a by product of some attitude or activity not consciously aiming at happiness, what are some of them? There is no sensible way to make a list by priorities so I’ll just start somewhere. I’ve learned that it’s heresy in America to knock competition, but happiness is lost unless we can keep our sense of competition in balance. If we are convinced in the school years that happiness is ours only when we beat someone else in the track meet, or in the race for grades, or in the struggle for friends, that feeling may become such a habit by the time we are grown that we can only be happy when we are proving ourselves superior to someone else. If we feel that way and fail — as we all do at times — a poison called envy eats us alive. Someone will always do better, make more, shine brighter — and our happiness quotient rises when we learn to live with that fact.

I agree with Bertrand Russell that we have a better chance for happiness if we learn something about a wise resignation. There is a time for surrender, what in Christian thought is called submission. It’s not an idea in much vogue because it sounds like giving up, but it’s really about knowing how much we cannot control,

how much we have to trust and not get lost in vain attempts to manage everything. And that applies to the way we treat ourselves. The greatest enemy of happiness is to take oneself too seriously. If — as you read it in school — “All the world’s a stage, And all the men and women merely players,” once in a while we may get the hero’s role, but for the most part we are bit players, sometimes even clowns, and we have to know when to laugh at ourselves, at how foolish we can be sometimes. It would seem almost impossible to be completely happy without a sense of humor.

We learn something else about happiness as we get older. As a teenager I equated happiness with constant change and excitement. If someone had tried to tell me that there could be satisfaction and pleasure in routine, in things done over and over at predictable times, I would have laughed it off as total nonsense. We like vacations, but something is desperately wrong if we are not glad to come back home to the small round of rituals that define our lives, the blessed sameness we eagerly escape and just as eagerly come back to. Some philosopher described it as “being at home among manageable things.” And as some of you know, that may include chores as simple as brewing a cup of coffee, making up a bed, mowing the lawn, raking leaves.

There are, of course, much larger issues. In a beautiful book called *Longing for Home*, Fred Buechner speaks of how, “in a world where it is often hard to believe in much of anything, we search to believe in something holy and beautiful and life-transcending that will give meaning and purpose to the lives we live.” He does not mention happiness because he knows it’s inevitable when life has meaning and purpose. No one came

to understand that better than Albert Schweitzer, whose whole life was a fulfillment of the Christian gospel. “I don’t know what your destiny will be,” he once told a group of young men. “But one thing I know: the only ones among you who will be really happy are those who will have sought and found how to serve.” If you know his life — and not to know it is to have missed one of the noblest lives in human history — you know that this was a faith he lived by, not something he merely preached. In his own words, this is how he came to that faith:

“While at the university and enjoying the happiness of being able to study and even to produce some results in science and art, I could not help thinking continually of others who were denied that happiness by their material circumstances or their health. Then one brilliant summer morning at Gunsbach, during the Whitsuntide holidays.....there came to me, as I awoke, the thought that I must not accept this happiness as a matter of course, but must give something in return for it. Proceeding to think the matter out at once with calm deliberation, while the birds were singing outside, I settled with myself before I got up, that I would consider myself justified in living till I was 30 for science and art, in order to devote myself from that time forward to the direct service of humanity. Many a time already had I tried to settle what meaning lay hidden for me in the saying of Jesus: *Whosoever would save his life shall lose it, and whosoever shall lose his life for my sake....shall save it* . Now my answer was found. In addition to the outward, I now had inward happiness.” (*Out of My Life and Thought*).

The secret is in a sense that one’s life is useful. The word probably passes unnoticed, but as part of my wedding ceremony I wish for the new husband and wife “long, happy and **useful** days together.” I can tell that

the first two adjectives strike a chord. They want the marriage to last, so “long” is good. And “happy” is what they certainly hope to be. But “useful”? It will likely be a while before they discover how important that word is. I was not surprised at all on Friday by what a dear friend of some 40 years shared when he came home from an extended trip. He said, “I looked at the Christmas tree farm, and realized that the two good men who work for me had it in great shape, even better than when I left. And when I drove down to my State Farm office I found that three efficient secretaries had it running perfectly. So how did things go with my choir?”

He and I have much in common, so I knew exactly how his mind was working. If he is to be fulfilled, he needs to be needed. If the tree farm and the insurance office could survive without him, was he needed by the choir? He knows already how well Ron Stuckey directs in his absence, so I thought it was not the moment to dwell on that. I chose to remind him of a different truth: how glad we are when he gets a break from routine, but how important he is to all of us: choir, congregation, and ministers. I know how much added meaning and purpose this place gives to his life.

We are happiest when we life makes sense because we feel useful. Let me leave you with a whimsical rabbinical story which tells of the moment Adam first opened his eyes. According to this Jewish legend, he looks around at creation and says to God, “This is utterly fantastic!” “I know,” God says. “But tell me,” Adam asks, “what is the meaning of it all?” Taken aback, God replies, “You mean, it has to have meaning?” “Of course,” Adam answers. “Well,” says God as he saunters off, “I’m sure you will think of something.”

And God's faith has been justified. The best among us **have** thought of some-thing, including the One in whose name this church exists, and who said that we find our greatest happiness when we think less about ourselves and more about others. All of which means I've tried to say in all sorts of ways this morning, that we aim at something else and happiness comes as a wonderful surprise.

Open our eyes this week, gracious God, to know whom it is that

we may help....and how....in Christ's holy name. Amen.