

The How of Happiness
A Sermon by the Rev. John P. Dick
Theme: Overcoming Seasonal Despair

I'm glad the Sunday newspaper continues to run the *Peanuts* cartoons. Even though Charles Schultz is no longer with us, his beloved characters will never fade away. I'm remembering one where Lucy asks, "why do you think we're put on earth, Charlie Brown?" If ever there was an ontological question, this is it. And Charlie replies, "To make others happy." Lucy says, "I don't think I'm making anyone very happy... Of course, nobody's making me very happy either." Then in the final panel, Lucy screams at the top of her lungs... **SOMEBODY'S NOT DOING HIS JOB!** I love it. Lucy wants the world to make her happy. And if she's not feeling it, then it's somebody's fault.

I wonder... as you find yourself in this sanctuary today, how are you feeling? Though we've had a bit of a respite from the harsh weather these past few days, the fact is that during the winter with the sub-freezing temperatures and snow making it hard to get out and about, lots of folks feel the doldrums? And then there is the post-holiday malaise when the bills come due and the snow birds are heading south and... well, you get the picture. There are many things that can affect one's attitude. So how about it... are you happy or are you sad? Are you hurting or are you glad? Are you cheerful or are you mad? And here's another question. Do you know why you're feeling the way you do?

Recently I came across a sermon in the journal, *Homiletics* (January-February, 2010, Volume 22: Number 1, pg. 41 ff.). It referenced a book by Sonja Lyubomirsky entitled *The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want*. (New York: Penguin Press, 2007) Sonja is a psychologist who has been doing research for more than 20 years in an effort to better understand our culture's elusive pursuit of happiness. And she's made some interesting discoveries.

For example, she has concluded that 50% of our happiness comes from disposition. I never heard that before. She says "we are Tigger or Eeyore based more on Mom and Dad than anything else. Like the thermostat on the wall, our temperament has a preset temperature." Interesting. But of course, this doesn't account for the whole equation.

Lyubomirsky's research also suggests that 10% of our happiness comes from our life circumstance. If something good is going on around me then I feel good. But if something not so good is happening in my life, then I'm not feeling too good. Right? My attitude is defined by my situation. Well, maybe not. Though it is easy to point to life's circumstance as the foundation for our outlook or emotion, the fact is we're fooling ourselves. The research has shown that people almost always return to their "dispositional set points" after life events spike their joy.

For example, you've won the lottery. Life doesn't get better than this, right? *Oh my goodness... I've got it made*, we say. *All my financial worries are gone*. But guess what. Rarely does life change in the long run for these folks. If they were grumpy before the windfall, they will be grumpy once again when the excitement wanes. In fact, long term studies of lottery winners demonstrate clearly that in most cases, things don't improve. All too often they get worse. So yes, back to the point, we respond to circumstance but only temporarily.

This brings us to the third discovery in Sonja's work. Her research suggests that we control through our thoughts and attitudes and actions the remaining 40% of our happiness. The implication is clear. If we allow life to unfold and dictate our response, our happiness will be predefined based on our disposition. However, it doesn't have to be that way for as this study shows we have the power and the freedom to make choices that are going to color and define our outlook and emotion.

Now at this point I want and need to step back and share a disclaimer. I wrote the first draft of this sermon earlier this week prior to the earthquake in Haiti. So please let it be understood. There are times in my opinion when these realities we've been defining are suspended. It goes without saying that the Haitian people at a time like this are not defaulting to their pre-set dispositions or freely choosing their response to their condition. They are driven by their circumstance and their pain and grief is beyond description. They have one primary and fundamental need at this point and it is survival. These kinds of major cataclysmic situations obviously affect our disposition in a mighty way in the moment... and sometimes that moment is extended. Yet having said this, I think that in the big picture this is a temporary suspension for a given time, and ultimately the Haitian people will reclaim their freedom and power to respond to their circumstance. Now admittedly, Haiti is the poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere so that power is very limited. But even at that limited level, they can have a degree of control. I think of the Nazi concentration camps by way of example. Out of the midst of that hell, we have seen the triumph of the human spirit. For with time, people find ways to choose how they're going to respond and how they're going to allow their circumstance to define their disposition. This is one of the qualities that separates human beings from the rest of creation.

Now having said this, lets return to our circumstance. For you and I have been blessed by the grace of God in ways we probably don't deserve and we do have the power and freedom to control our thoughts, attitudes and actions. So, growing out of today's psalm, let me share two suggestions related to our faith which can help to lift the spirit.

The first has to do with *standing gratefully in the presence God!* How do we say "thank you" on a regular basis and to whom do we express our gratitude? Of course there is One before all others to whom we bow in appreciation, and this 138th psalm makes that clear. For it says in the very first verse, **"I give you thanks, O Lord, with my whole heart; before the gods I sing your praise..."** This is a poem of lavish thanksgiving and praise to the Lord. And note... this is something I am called to do *with my whole heart!*

This concept of offering to God gratitude with one's whole heart is not unique to the psalms. It is a concept brought to life through the Deuteronomistic and prophetic theologies of the Old Testament. And it's most intriguing. Essentially it means bringing your whole self –

body, mind, emotion and spirit – gratefully before the throne of grace. If I say “thank you to God” with my words, it means I give evidence of that gratitude in the way I treat my neighbor. If I say “thank you to God” with my heart, it means I give evidence of that gratitude in the way that I think about my Savior. There is a consistency that moves through my life in all of its expressions. And giving gratitude to God is one way to show this consistency. And guess what... when we choose to regularly lift our praise to the heavens, it makes us feel better, too.

How about it... how do you go about thanking God with your whole heart? Do we take time to say “thanks” to the people in our lives? We should, you know, because we thank God as we live gratefully and gracefully with each other. Heavenly gratitude is documented in the way we live thankfully with each other.

I read somewhere recently about a guy who does something a bit unusual while traveling. You know these signs on trucks that ask the question: *How’s My Driving?*” and they give you a number to call in the event you see something inappropriate? Well this gentleman enjoys calling those numbers when he sees a trucker doing something that is courteous or kind to extend an appreciative word on his behalf. How cool. Not only does it help the trucker but in his words, “it makes me feel great, too!” Why haven’t I thought of that? You see the point... we feel better when we live life with a constant sense of appreciation to God that lives itself out with a spirit of gratitude extended to those around us. That’s what it means to give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart.

Then there is a second suggestion to lift one’s spirits that I draw from this psalm and it has to do with *servicing faithfully to the glory of God!* Now I’m looking at the final verse of the psalm... **“The Lord will fulfill his purpose for me; your steadfast love, O Lord, endures forever. Do not forsake the work of your hands.”** (verse 8) Obviously, this is a call to God to strengthen us for the tasks at hand. We have been created by God to faithfully serve the Lord by caring for and serving each other. If the New Testament teaches us anything, it is that Christians are called to be “Little Christs”. I love the way Paul describes it in I Corinthians (10:31)... **Whatever you do, do everything for the glory of God.**” Of course these words are familiar because they are engraved above the fireplace in the Hearthside Room. They are a beautiful reminder to us every time we walk by that we are to serve God faithfully by caring for each other and for all of God’s greater creation. *Whatever you do, do it to the glory of God!*

There is a wonderful video that is making the rounds. It’s called *The Invisible Woman*. Are you familiar with it? It says in a powerful way what I’m trying to express so I’d like to share it with you as I bring this message to an end. (AOL Video – The Invisible Woman) It’s interesting that the woman sharing her thoughts isn’t even identified on the video. But she is obviously addressing a women’s gathering. There are a couple things she references, gentlemen, that most of us probably aren’t going to be engaging in. But, you’ll see the clear point of this powerful message for it speaks to every one of us. (at this point, Rich shows the video)

Yes, let’s pray that our work will stand as a monument to an even greater God. My friends, if you want to lift your spirits in the doldrums of winter or in the harsh chapters of life, just remember these two simple antidotes... *stand gratefully in the presence of God and serve faithfully to the Glory of God!* I believe it will work. Amen and AMEN!

