

Faith and Wellness
February 15, 2009
2 Kings 5:1-14
St. John United Methodist Church
Anchorage, Alaska
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A woman was walking down a residential street and saw a frail, wizened old man rocking contentedly in a chair on his porch. She called out to him as she passed by, "Hello there! I couldn't help but notice how happy you look. Tell me," she said, "what's your secret for a long happy life?"

"I smoke three packs of cigarettes a day," he replied. "I drink a case of whisky a week, eat nothing but fast food, and never, ever do any exercise."

"Wow!" said the woman, "that is amazing. That must make you really happy! And just how old are you?" she asked.

"Twenty-six," he replied.

Sometimes looks can be deceiving. Sometimes people look good on the outside but inside they feel terrible.

Despite all the health care available in this country, despite all the alternative medicines and supplements, despite all the pills advertised on TV, despite the universal knowledge of the benefits of proper diet and exercise, Americans on the whole don't feel very good. Why aren't we feeling better if we're getting better? One reason we don't know how to feel good is that so little work has been done to discover the factors that actually do make us feel good and positive about life. David Myers and Ed Diener pointed out this lack of research in a study they called "The Science of Happiness." They found that from 1967 to 1995, psychological articles address anger over 5,000 times; anxiety is mentioned over 38,000 times, depression 48,000 times. But happiness? Only 1,700 times. Life satisfaction? Only 2,300. Joy? Only 400. This amounts to a 21 to 1 ratio of negative to positive emotions studied by our scientists. Why do we appear to be so focused on the negative?

Clinical psychologist, Jonathan Kramer, tells the story of Nick, their oldest child. "Nick was always a happy, energetic kid who'd usually come running or skipping out of school. But one fall day, when Nick was 6 years old, I was parked at the curb when I saw Nick walking slowly toward me, his curly head hung low, his mouth turned down, a bunch of papers in his hand. Nick seemed to drag himself along the sidewalk. He slowly pulled open the car door and slumped into the seat.

"Hi, Nick. How are you doing?" I asked. No response.

"What's goin' on? Did something bad happen today?"

Nick slowly nodded yes before turning his face away.

"Oh come on, Nick. Tell your old dad what's wrong," I prodded.

"I'm bad," Nick said at last.

"Bad? Why do you say that?"

Nick handed over a crumpled paper. Smoothing it out revealed rows of math problems. A big, red "-3" dominated the top. "Look," Nick said, tears running down his cheeks, his lips quivering. He pointed at the glaring red mark. "Look, Dad, I got a bad grade."

After considering for a long moment, I said, "That minus three doesn't mean you're bad or that you got a bad grade, Nick. It means you missed just three problems on this whole paper. I started counting up the correct ones that weren't marked, pointing at each one as I went. By the 10th correct one, Nick had joined in the counting, and by the time we'd gotten to 27, Nick's tear-stained cheeks were showing signs of happiness. I had him write a big, black "+27" next to the red "-3."

"There. Twenty-seven right." Nick absorbed the truth for a moment before his usual bright smile reinstated itself on his little-boy face. Nick was able to find a good lesson in the red "-3." But many of us never learn this lesson. Many of us grow up with a barrage of criticism. Since we learn and adapt to what's familiar, our inner voice criticizes us automatically, and we learn to apply this critical spirit to ourselves and the world. And so we develop a radar system that takes for granted the things we do right, while it scans for what's missing or wrong in ourselves and in life. We come to feel that we are "bad", inadequate, unworthy or unlovable.

Jung successor and analyst James Hillman asks the question, "Why do we focus so intensely on our problems?" and then answers it: "Somehow we desire our problems; we are in love with them as much as we want to get rid of them." Doesn't this sound a bit bizarre to you? That we could get attached to our problems?

By now researchers have asked a huge sampling of the human race -- more than a million people -- what makes life satisfying. The results are in. And we now have some predictors of joy and life satisfaction. Surprisingly, or not so surprisingly given the Naaman story, there is virtually no relationship between income and happiness. The richest Americans are negligibly happier than the average American. Similarly, there is little relationship between disabilities and happiness. Within four months of his paralyzing accident, Christopher Reeve reported "genuine joy in being alive."

These authors did find five traits that characterize "happy" people. Do you have these qualities in your life?

1) "Positive self-image." People who are content with life are confident about their abilities, and embracing of their gifts.

2) "Personal Control." Upbeat people exert control over their lives. In theological language, people who are happier are more self-disciplined than people who aren't.

3) "Optimistic." A positive outlook on life and an openness to others is essential to good mental health.

4) "Extroverted." In their use of this term, the authors are more concerned about the ability to achieve lasting relationships with others than about some personality style.

But the trait that correlated most closely with happiness was #5: "Faith." Karl Marx got it as wrong as anyone could get it when he said religion was an opiate of the people. On the contrary, religion is a key stimulant to and ingredient in a happy life. In the words of their research, "Actively religious people are much less likely to become delinquent, to abuse drugs and alcohol, to divorce and to commit suicide. In one Gallup Poll, highly spiritual people were twice as likely as those lowest in spiritual commitment to declare themselves very happy. Other surveys find that happiness and life satisfaction rise with strength of religious affiliation AND frequency of worship attendance. So, you want to be happy? Come to worship more often.

While psychological examinations of emotional health may be considered by some as "soft science," researchers in the "hard sciences" are rapidly finding similar correlations

between a commitment of faithfulness and the physical well-being of individuals. Recent studies have found that those individuals who profess a belief in God, who confess to an active faith relationship, are more generally healthy than those who don't. In fact, it is no longer a hypothesis that when believers do become injured or ill, they tend to heal faster, respond better to treatment, and generally get well more quickly and more often than those who disavow any active faith life.

It's time to dig into Naaman's story. Naaman was a powerful army commander who suffered from one of many skin diseases labeled as "leprosy." But he could find no cure in Aram. In desperation Naaman journeys to Israel to visit a prophet he has been told could heal him. But when Naaman receives the prophet's prescription, he is outraged by the seeming simplicity of the treatment. Instead of performing some elaborate healing ritual Elisha merely instructs Naaman to go and bathe in the Jordan. The prophet does not even appear before Naaman to diagnose his malady. He simply sends a servant out to Naaman with his directions.

Naaman thought a return to complete health depended on his obtaining a cure for his leprous skin condition. Elisha's proposed treatment, however, reveal that Naaman needs more than his skin cleared in order to be restored to full health. What he needed most was his attitude adjusted. The prideful sense of self-importance that Naaman demonstrated outside Elisha's door had to be washed away just as completely as the white lesions that covered his skin.

Naaman almost blew it. He was ready to do anything in order to receive healing, anything, that is, except admit that he could do nothing but have faith that he would be healed. Only when Naaman finally lets someone else take the reins, only when he humbly submits himself to the plain, muddy waters of the Jordan, does Naaman finally experience the healing he longed for. Naaman's journey toward health teaches us that to be healed, to experience "life satisfaction" or "serenity," we must remain open to all the possibilities a life of faith might present to us.

Are your heart and spirit open to whatever path your faith journey might take you in order to make genuine, complete health your own? Are you prepared to receive both a diagnosis and a course of treatment that may be totally unexpected? For example, are you open to the possibility that regular Bible reading might contribute to your overall health? Will you consider the notion that extravagant generosity is an important ingredient in your wellness? Is it possible that faithful attendance in church can strengthen your spirit, mind, and body?

A story is told of a very poor neighborhood where a doctor named "Doctor Ray" worked. Part of his practice was the treatment of the neediest of the needy. To make himself more accessible to these indigent people, Dr. Ray set up his office where it could be reached by private staircase, without fear of disclosure. And for directions to this upstairs haven, there was just a simple plaque, bearing only these words: 'Dr. Ray is up there.' When this noble and generous healer at last passed away, his patients wanted to memorialize him with a bronze plaque on his tomb. But, of course, their money wouldn't go that far. So, in a moment of inspiration, above the grave they placed the sign that had hung outside the door of his office: 'Dr. Ray is up there.' Dr. Ray is up there."

Think for a moment about your own need for healing. It may be your body. It may be your emotions. It may be your soul. It is vitally important that you are clear that the Source of your healing is God. You may have nothing to give in return except a willing

heart that trusts that Dr. God is up there. May your own journey towards wellness include a place for Dr. God.