

Happiness Habits – Part 2
Psalm 37:1-6
April 6, 2008
St. John United Methodist Church
Anchorage, Alaska
David Beckett, D.Min.

The dictionary defines “happy” as “delighted, pleased, or glad over a particular thing.” How often during a typical day would you say that you experience delight? Do you know when you are feeling pleased or glad? Which would you say tends to be the primary source of your delight: things, experiences, or interactions with people?

Last Sunday we examined six habits that psychologists say are proven to lead to happy relationships. These ten habits are adapted from the work of Dr. Brent Atkinson. Although the research was specifically related to marriage these habits are not just for marriage but can be used to strengthen all of our interpersonal relationships. Today we focus on the remaining four habits of happiness under the category of building the emotional bond.

Emotional bonds are what make us human. We have varying degrees of bonds with all kinds and numbers of people. It makes sense that the closer we feel to someone, the deeper the emotional bond. For many it will be the marriage or family bond that is the strongest. The truth is that we have many levels of emotional bonds with many different people. So it will be important to think of these habits as having application not just to marriage, but to all of our relationships.

The first habit to build the emotional bond is to BE CURIOUS ABOUT THE OTHER PERSON’S WORLD. Studies suggest that a significant difference between people destined to succeed in their relationships versus those who will fail is how much they know about the other person’s worlds. If you were given a quiz on your close friends’ or spouse’s world what kind of grade would you get? Do you know the principal names of their co-workers? Do you know the issues he or she faces at work?

Behind this curiosity is the ability to ask good questions. When we talk with someone it is generally an exchange of questions and answers. The first level of questions is usually “How are you doing?” or “How is your family?” When I am asked such questions, I usually respond with short, general answers. If the other person picks up on something I said, or remembers something from the past and asks me a more detailed question my emotional bond with that person becomes stronger.

When I was a science teacher I gave my 8th graders a homework assignment. They were to come up with ten observation questions. Looking at their world they were to observe and formulate questions based on those observations. It was amazing how difficult this was for them.

Isidor Rabi, a Nobel prize winner in science, was asked how he became a scientist. Rabi replied that every day after school his mother would talk to him about his school day. Every day she always inquired, "Did you ask a good question today?" "Asking good questions," Rabi said, "made me become a scientist." I want to say, "Asking good questions is what can make you a good friend and spouse.

The second habit that builds the emotional bond is FOCUS ON THE POSITIVE. Research suggests that when intimate partners are upset with one another, they

underestimate the positive things that happen in their relationship by 50%. Or, if they notice, they don't acknowledge them. If you want your relationship to succeed, you will develop the habit of noticing, thinking about, and talking about the small, positive things that happen. You'll also spend more time remembering and talking about the positive things that have happened in the past.

Pastor Gary Langness tells a wonderful story about noticing the positive. "Just up the street from the church where I work there is my favorite place to eat, McDonald's. It is more than just another restaurant. It is owned by a woman who has a commitment to hiring and patiently nurturing folks with disabilities. One young man from this congregation was hired and it gave him pride and self-esteem. One day as the owner handed me my favorite meal I looked at her and said, 'Jane, I just want to say thanks to you for what you do on behalf of so many people. You really make a difference.' She was a bit surprised at my comment, blushed and smiled. Every time I see her, she is smiling and still hiring and working with people to change their lives."¹

If you and I are going to develop the habit of focusing on the positive we will need to pay attention to positive words and actions around us every day.

The third habit we need in order to build emotional bonds is **INTENTIONAL ACTS OF KINDNESS**. Research studies suggest that people who initiate small acts of caring without strings attached are much more likely to end up in happy marriages and relationships than people who neglect such small acts. These people also make more attempts to connect and they pick up on and respond to small attempts at connection made by others. People who succeed allow themselves to need nurturing from others and provide emotional nurturing as well.

Judith Brain in Lexington, Massachusetts, tells the following story about a neighbor.² "My son is a jazz musician. My husband and I went to hear his band one night, at a club in Roxbury. It was a warm, interracial, friendly spot. At the table next to ours a big friendly African-American man attended to a tiny, twisted human being on a wheeled cart. A paralyzed man with a puppet's body and large misshapen head lay on the cart, sipping his beer through a straw and watching the musicians attentively. He seemed alert, but only his eyes moved so it was hard to tell how much he really took in. His friend captured our attention. He seemed alive to every nuance of this poor, deformed man. He leaned close to hear him speak in that noisy club and his manner proclaimed love.

I thought about how wonderful this scene was. The club that embraced this broken person. I felt part of that embrace. I, too, was reaching out in some way with a friendly smile. "I accept you," I was saying.

The room was smoky and my contact lenses gave me trouble. I popped them out, sashed them in my water glass, and put them back. In a few minutes, the tall man came over to our table and gave me a bottle of eye drops. "Here, you need this." "Oh, thanks," I gushed. "You noticed." "No, my friend did," he said, pointing to the man on the cart. On that crooked face was a big grin.

He took pity on me. I came out of my arrogant fog. "I accept you." What presumption! I thought I was whole and he was not. I thought I was the giver and he

¹ —luthersem.edu/stewardship/resource_detail.asp?resource_id=129. Retrieved April 11, 2007.

² (*Preaching the Revised Common Lectionary*, July 9, 2001)

was alien, the last person in the world who could help me. But the tables were turned. That twisted man in the jazz club became an unexpected source of kindness.”

The fourth habit that strengthens the emotional bond is to PURSUE SHARED MEANING. People destined to succeed in their relationships and marriages enjoy talking about each others’ hopes and dreams. They are committed to their own and their partner’s hopes and dreams. They strive to weave a fabric that includes “shared meaning.” It’s not just talking about each other’s day or the details of life. It’s taking time to talk about the bigger picture of what they hope and dream.

God has a dream for you. In Psalm 37 we read, “Take delight in the Lord, and he will give you the desires of your heart.” Habits that lead to happiness need to begin with God. The first priority is to be happy in God. When this happens then it is that our desire for healthy, happy people relationships will unfold. But it doesn’t come automatically. It takes lots and lots of work. Developing habits of happiness in our relationships require effort and discipline.

From an unknown source I leave you with this poem.
Forget each kindness that you do as soon as you have done it.
Forget the praise that falls to you the moment you have won it.
Forget the slander that you hear before you can repeat it.
Forget each slight, each spite, each sneer, whenever you may meet.
Remember every promise made and keep it to the letter.
Remember those who lend you aid and be a grateful debtor.
Remember all the happiness that comes your way in living.
Forget each worry and distress; be hopeful and forgiving.
Remember good, remember truth, remember heaven is above you.
And you will find, through age and youth, that many will love you.

May God give you the resolve to nurture these ten habits in your heart and life.