

Proper 4 Year B  
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St. James, Wheat Ridge

By the Rev. Becky Jones

Yale University professor Laurie Santos  
just wanted her students to be happy.  
Now, you may be asking yourself,  
her students are young, they're affluent, and they're attending Yale  
University!  
What's NOT to be happy about?

But sadly, huge numbers of Yale students  
report they are anything BUT happy.  
They're stressed.  
They're anxious.  
They're depressed.  
In short, Yale students are a pretty good reflection  
of the mental health of the rest of the country these days.  
By most measures of happiness,  
Americans are struggling to find happiness.  
Much of the world is happier than we are right now.

And so Professor Santos put together the syllabus for Psychology 157:  
Psychology and the Good Life.

Turns out, it's the most popular class ever offered at Yale,  
with more than 1200 undergrad students signing up for it,  
according to a piece that ran recently in the New York Times.  
Can you imagine?  
If the class got any bigger,  
they'd have to move it in the football stadium!

The class is designed to focus on well-being,  
on positive psychology,  
as opposed to dysfunction.

The first nine lectures in this psychology class  
are all about what does NOT lead to happiness.

We think we know what would make us happy,  
but in truth, we don't.

So let's test this, shall we?

Right now, I want you to mentally make a list  
of things you think would make you happier.

They can be big things, like a new car;

or little things, like a nice cup of coffee about now.

Take just a few seconds and see if you can come up with four or five.

"I would be happier if I had \_\_\_\_\_."

Got your list ready?

Let's have a look.

Wrong. Wrong. Wrong. Wrong.

Scientists who've studied this say  
that nearly everything we think will make us happier won't,  
because nearly everything we're likely to list,  
assuming that our basic life needs are taken care of,  
is some circumstantial change.

More money.

A different house.

A better body.

Our mind is constantly telling us that if you just get those things,  
we will at last be happy.

But our minds are wrong.

Scientists tell us that roughly 50 percent of happiness  
is determined by our genes.

Some people are just born happy,

and others are just born unhappy,

and there is nothing we can do about our genetic makeup.

About 10 percent is determined by circumstance,  
which is somewhat out of our control.

And about 40 percent is determined by our thoughts,  
our actions, and our attitudes,  
all of which is entirely within our control.

Don't underestimate just how much changing our behavior,  
rather than our circumstances,  
can significantly increase our sense of well-being,  
and hence our happiness.

There are certain habits that pop up time and again  
among people who already identify as happy.

Happy people devote time to family and friends.

Happy people practice gratitude.

Happy people practice optimism.

Happy people are physically active.

They savor life's pleasures  
and try to live in the present moment.

Happy people serve something greater than themselves.

Or as the apostle Paul put it, in his second letter to the Corinthians,

"It is the God who said,

'Let light shine out of darkness,'

who has shone in our hearts

to give the light of the knowledge of the glory of God  
in the face of Jesus Christ.

But we have this treasure in clay jars,

so that it may be made clear that this extraordinary power belongs to God  
and does not come from us.

We are afflicted in every way, but not crushed;

perplexed, but not driven to despair;

persecuted, but not forsaken;

struck down, but not destroyed.'

Paul was speaking in the royal "we."

Truth is, he was really just talking about himself.

But what he says really does apply to happy people everywhere.

You can be in the world's worst circumstances, and still be happy.

Because happiness doesn't depend on an easy life.

But back to this psychology class.

Here's one of the lessons from the class.

It's another thought experiment.

If you suddenly found you had an extra \$100,  
what would you do with it?

Now, what would you do if you suddenly found  
you had an extra hour?

With the money, chances are you'd use it on a treat.  
To buy something you hadn't budgeted before,  
rather than paying off existing debt.

But with time, it's the opposite.  
There's a good chance you'd use that extra hour  
to catch up on work,  
rather than to go for a walk  
or visit a museum,  
or do something you otherwise wouldn't have time to do.

So let's go back to that theoretical extra \$100 you've been given.  
Research has shown that most people would be happier  
if they spent that money  
on something that buys them time  
rather than on some material good.  
Like using the money to  
hire a house cleaner to clean your house,  
as opposed to buying a new vacuum cleaner.  
Your mind tells you to go with the vacuum cleaner.  
But science says no, buy yourself some time instead.  
You'll be happier.

All of which brings us to our gospel lesson today.  
It's Jesus, talking about the Sabbath.  
Now, we could get into an in-depth discussion  
about what Jesus really intended  
by bringing David into all this,  
and maybe we will do that ... some other time.

But now, on this first Sunday of June,  
when the sun is shining and it's beautiful outside,  
and the mountains beckon,  
and maybe the front porch or the recliner beckons,  
I don't want to talk about David.  
I want to talk about Sabbath.

“The Sabbath,” Jesus says, “was made for humankind,  
and not humankind for the Sabbath.”

I think that’s his way of saying  
rules are meant to be broken.

And sometimes, we all just need a break.

I’m taking some time off this week,  
and I hope you will too.

Let me encourage you this week  
to be kind to yourself.

Don’t work quite so hard.

Put your feet up.

Enjoy some time for yourself.

Find something that nourishes your soul,  
and focus on that.

Put aside the cares and concerns of your life for awhile.

“Stretch out you hand,” Jesus said to the man with the withered hand.

Maybe he’s telling you to just stretch out.

Get some rest,

and see what restorative power that may hold.

The Lord knows our sitting down and our rising up.

This week, sit a spell with God.

Amen.