

Haydenville Congregational Church
The Rev. Dr. Andrea Ayvazian
February 7, 2010
Psalm 138

“I give you thanks with my whole heart...”

*May the words of my mouth and the meditations of our hearts
be acceptable in thy sight, O Lord Our Strength and Our Redeemer. Amen.*

Years ago when I was working hard in graduate school to get my Ph.D., the Chair of my doctoral committee would routinely refer to people with Ph.D.s as “doctors who don’t help anybody.” (As opposed to M.D.s who are doctors who actually help people.) It certainly took some of the wind out of my sails as I was knocking myself out with the singular goal of someday being Dr. Andrea Ayvazian. My Chair’s fairly relentless joke seeped into my thinking so I am always on the look-out for Ph.D. types doing research or writing in popular magazines who are actually helping people....Ph.D. types whose research, writing, and speaking helps people understand themselves better, or the world better or just helps people get by and get along tough day after tough day.

Therefore, I was delighted to stumble upon Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky, a research psychologist and University of California professor, whose research and writing really do help people in concrete ways. Dr. Lyubomirsky’s book, The How of Happiness: A Scientific Approach to Getting the Life You Want, provides a detailed plan to increase happiness in our lives—in the short term and over the long haul. Drawing on her groundbreaking research over a twenty year period with thousands of men and women, Dr. Lyubomirsky was able to define what happiness is, what it isn’t, and what can be done to bring us closer to the happy life we envision for ourselves.

Dr. Lyubomirsky is both smart and creative. In The How of Happiness she explains specific strategies that offer new and potentially-life-changing ways to understand our innate potential for happiness as well as our ability to obtain and sustain happiness in our lives. AND to my surprise and delight, Dr. Lyubomirsky’s findings have a spiritual component and spiritual implications! Stay with me, I will explain.

Slicing happiness up like a pie, Dr. Lyubomirsky claims that there are three pieces that contribute to a happy outlook on life. Here is a quick summary of her three pieces of the happiness pie:

The first piece of the pie is the biggest one—apparently 50% of our happiness comes from our disposition. It's in our DNA. You can thank your parents for this slice of the pie. This 50% number is what Lyubomirsky calls your “happiness set point.” She believes that we experience upswings and downturns but after most major and minor life events, we return to this genetically-determined “happiness set point.”

The next slice of the pie is surprising: apparently only 10% of a person's happiness comes from life circumstances like a raise at work, a child's good grades at school, going on a date with an adorable new flame. It turns out, according to The How of Happiness, we give too much importance to life circumstances—only 10% of our overall happiness comes from things we say we want that will make us happy. When newlyweds and lottery winners are studied over time, it is clear that people usually return to their “happiness set point” after life events spike their happiness. Apparently, joyous events come and go and provide little lasting change in one's overall feeling of happiness.

The final piece of the pie is the last 40%. What I find so amazing is that Lyubomirsky says we have control over 40% of our happiness. That is a huge slice of the pie, almost as big as the DNA slice we inherit from our parents. That 40% of the pie—how happy we feel at any given time—represents our thoughts, attitudes and actions. **And (here's the punch line, the big break-through in her research) that 40% can be managed through happiness-fostering habits.**

The How of Happiness lists twelve happiness-fostering habits including cultivating optimism, avoiding overthinking and social comparisons, practicing acts of kindness, nurturing social relationships, learning to forgive, taking care of your body, and committing to personal goals. All are noteworthy, all important, all make a difference in how happy one feels overall. But THE #1 happiness-fostering habit on the list is the habit of *expressing gratitude*. That's right...being grateful. Lyubomirsky says that expressing gratitude, not just feeling, but expressing gratitude, (actually saying words of appreciation and I would add prayers of thanksgiving) is THE # 1 happiness-fostering habit. So I would say that at the very top of Lyubomirsky's research-proven list is Psalm 138. Well not exactly but close! Listen again to the opening words of Psalm 138: *I give you thanks O God, with my whole heart...*

Lyubomirsky's research shows that expressing gratitude brings happiness to the giver, joy to the receiver, and radiates happiness to the people around them. Psalm 138, written by King David, does just that. He is engaged in sort of gracious gushing at God.

The Psalm opens with two verses of David's personal thanksgiving, then moves to two verses of communal thanksgiving, and closes with two verses of why God should be thanked.

*I give you thanks, O God, with my whole heart;
before the gods I sing your praise;
I bow down toward your holy temple
and give thanks to your name for your steadfast love
and your faithfulness;
for you have exalted above everything
your name and your word.
On the day I called you, you answered me,
my strength of soul you increased.
All the rulers of the earth shall praise you, O God,
for they have heard the words of your mouth;
and they shall sing of the ways of God,
for great is the glory of God.
For God, though high, regards the lowly,
but knows the haughty from afar.
Though I walk in the midst of trouble,
you preserve my life;
you stretch out your hand against the wrath of my enemies,
and your right hand delivers me.
God's purpose for me will be fulfilled;
your steadfast love, O God, endures forever.
Do not forsake the work of your hands.*

Without knowing it, David followed Lyubomirsky's advice: he expressed gratitude (remember the EXPRESSING part is so important) and he adheres to what Lyubomirsky says is key in the expression of gratitude—it must be specific, planned, intentional and habitual. If you read the many Psalms of David in the Hebrew Scriptures his words of thanksgiving are just that: specific, planned, intentional and habitual.

Listen to a sample of expressions of gratitude from some of the Psalms of David:

Sing praises to God, O you saints of God, and give thanks to God's holy name.
Psalm 30.

*Make a joyful noise to the Lord, all the earth...enter his gather with thanksgiving
and his courts with praise.* Psalm 100

*I will give thanks to you, O Lord, among the peoples, and I will sing praises to you
among nations.* Psalm 108

*Praise the Lord! I will give thanks to the Lord with my whole heart, in the
company of the upright in the congregation.* Psalm 111

And listen now to Psalm 136 from the book Psalms for Young Children...Psalm
136 rewritten for young ones...

*Thank you, God,
you are so good!
Your love never ends.*
*Thank you, God,
for making the sun!
Your love never ends.*
*Thank you, God,
for the moon and the stars!
Your love is forever and ever.*

David's Psalms call for corporate praise and thanks of God. God's work is worthy of celebration and thanksgiving. God's ways merit joyous, emotive expressions of gratitude. And so in the ancient words of a faithful King who lived so long ago, and we could say in contemporary research done by a psychologist in our own time, we are called to expressions of gratitude to God that are specific, planed, intentional and habitual.

According to Dr. Sonja Lyubomirsky, we will be better, healthier and happier if we thank God and each other for the blessings and interactions that grace our lives.

And so we need to identify and act upon those opportunities throughout EACH DAY that present themselves to us, opportunities to express gratitude.

Where are those opportunities in a normal day for me?

Well, on these cold, gray lifeless winter days I could say, "Thank you God for this winter day. I appreciate the four seasons in beautiful New England so much."

Yesterday I could have said, "Thank you God for the brook that talks to me while I hike up Mt. Tom on these brisk winter mornings."

Yesterday I also could have said, “Thank you God for a warm, safe healing hospital in our small city where little Rowan, one of our beloved triplets, can recover heal from his chest cold.”

Every day of the year I could say, “Thank you God for a Church family that is faithful and loyal, generous and loving, welcoming and close-knit.”

The How of Happiness makes it clear that we can cultivate happiness-fostering habits and the #1 habit listed is *expressing gratitude*. Furthermore, the research is clear: the expression, not just the feeling, the expression of gratitude must be specific, planned, intentional and habitual. Dr. Lyubomirsky says that the bumpersticker you sometimes see: “Practice random acts of kindness and senseless acts of beauty” sounds lovely but is wrong. Her research, carried out over decades with thousands of subjects, shows that expressions of gratitude should not be random but focused and intentional. And so the next time you remember that high school teacher that made a big difference in your life 35 years ago, write him/her a letter and say thank you.

And when stopped at a light behind a truck that says “How’s my driving?” and gives an 800 hotline number, pick up your cell phone and report a courteous driver. When you’re at home and you pick up your new, updated Church Directory, drop a note to our Church Clerk and tell her how much you appreciate her careful work. Write an article for the Church newsletter expressing your gratitude for our Sexton and all she does to keep our Church clean and beautiful.

What a surprise.

It turns out that when you look out for and thank others, you are really looking out for you—you are doing something that increases your overall life happiness quotient. The old expression, “Count your blessings,” is good advice but it is only part of the story. Dr. Lyubomirsky would probably say: count them, list them and express them.

The How of Happiness is not technically a religious book but I found it was infused with spiritual content and suggestions that concern faith. To increase our sense of happiness in this world we need to recognize that God is always present to us and loving us, we need to see God in the smallest acts and events in our daily lives, and we need to THANK GOD for God’s presence, goodness and grace.

We also need to express our gratitude to one another. Giving thanks is good for the one being thanked and good for the one doing the thanking.

It makes me think of that old slogan for Guinness Beer that was popular years ago:
“It’s not just good, it’s good for you.”
Expressing gratitude is not just good, it IS good for you.

And so my dear brothers and sisters, our first expression of thanks when we rise each day should be expressions of gratitude to God for God’s loving presence, grace and guidance with us when we sleep, with us when we rise, with us throughout each day.

Thank you: a simple but powerful expression.
Thank you: when said to God and to others, it both changes us and means that we have already been changed.

Amen.

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