

ON BEING HAPPY

I think it is safe to say that everyone wants to be happy. I don't know anyone who would prefer to emotionally muddle through life, much less be miserable. But what is happiness? It is certainly not a state of being giddy with gladness. Neither is it a matter of being satisfied with our life, coming to terms with our situation no matter how constrained and unfruitful it might be. While happiness may be defined in different ways, a reasonable definition includes a sense of fulfillment and a positive emotional outlook.

Jesus said he came so that people could have life more abundant (John 10:10). He didn't mean that he came so people could have quantitatively more life but so people can have qualitatively better life. I think this has something to do with happiness. Jesus wants us to experience fulfillment and to rest secure in the hands of God and the end result is joy, a positive emotional outlook.

The Declaration of Independence speaks of a "right to pursue happiness." But we have no right to happiness itself. The world doesn't owe us happiness. Nor should we try to get happiness by any possible means, especially if our efforts leave other people more miserable. And despite what many people say, it is not true that, "All that matters is that you are happy." Still, happiness matters.

I recently read a little book entitled *Happiness: a Very Short Introduction*. The author, philosopher Daniel Haybron offers a number of helpful insights and reminds us of some truths that should be evident. He notes that there is no real happiness without a sense of meaning. "Any life dedicated to worthwhile ends is meaningful." Commitment to things that matter –not only for ourselves but for others, too- is a major part of a good life. We are enriched as we do things that enrich the lives of others.

Being a spectator of a movie or a play or a sports event can be enjoyable. But being a spectator isn't what makes life meaningful. Engagement is required for a sense of fulfillment that leads to happiness. Living a life of integrity and service is essential for a good life, a life we can be "justifiably satisfied with." Such a life doesn't require wealth or the sort of desirable possessions that lead to social validation. In fact a number of studies have found that beyond a fairly modest level, more money doesn't generally increase happiness, though it might make life easier in some ways and more complicated in others.

Among the things that do foster happiness are active connections with people and things that matter, a sense of security, an ability to relax, and the recognition that you have reason to be satisfied with your life. A happy life isn't usually one without troubles, challenges and set-backs. It is not one filled with positive emotions at every point. But a happy life is one that is possible as we are more likely to find as we follow Jesus in the ways of service and love.