

HAPPINESS – A HEART MOVEMENT

(Reflection preached by Rev. Peggy McDonagh, September 22 2019)

Recently I read a research paper written by Nico Rose entitled, “Introducing Self-Permission: Theoretical Framework and Proposed Assessment”.

In the paper, Rose considers to what extent happiness and satisfaction with life are directly influenced by our personal initiatives, versus what lies beyond our sphere of control. One paper he cites suggests that “50% of our individual happiness is determined by our genes and 10% is influenced by external living conditions such as the country we live in, or the amount of money we earn. That leaves a solid 40% of our happiness under our personal control that can best be activated by adopting mindsets and engaging intentional activities that promote happiness.”

Whatever the percentage, the fact is that part of our happiness is under our personal control and this inspires me to encourage all of us to maintain a positive mindset.

There is a small beautiful country nestled between China and India called Bhutan; an isolated Buddhist kingdom in the lap of the Himalayas, which, until about 40 years ago, remained set apart from the rest of the world. This country’s story and their citizen’s philosophy of happiness are compelling and support Nico’s research that personal happiness can be obtained through intentional behaviors and activities.

In the mid-70s the Fourth King of Bhutan championed a new approach to his country’s development that he called Gross National Happiness, a concept based on the philosophy that the spiritual, physical, social and environmental health of Bhutan’s citizens must take precedence over the economic and political practice of materialism. Prosperity is measured not with money but with personal and community well-being.

The Buddhist philosophy of interdependence is at the heart of Gross National Happiness, meaning that each person is but a small part of the

larger whole yet has the power to affect every other part; therefore, how people connect with each other will either sustain or destroy them.

In this regard, the accumulation of wealth is discouraged because it goes against the philosophy of interdependence because people can become enslaved by materialism, individualism, and greed and these can become personal and societal goals that have little regard for its affects on others and the environment.

Despite their many challenges such as poverty, waste management, environmental concerns, and growing issues around drug and alcoholism, the Bhutanese people strive to model happiness and optimism.

Nyingtob Pema Norbu, the Gross National Happiness Commission planning officer says that “happiness is not a perfect life softly cocooned in pillows of cleanliness, security, and abundance. When we refer to happiness, we are talking about harmony, striking a balance.” For the Bhutanese happiness is an inner state of contentment that remains constant no matter what people face. They endeavor to accomplish this by upholding the four fundamental values of Gross National Happiness: generosity, ethics, tolerance and perseverance.

It seems to me that if the 40% of personal happiness is dependent on our own actions then personally and globally we all need to engage the values of generosity, ethics, tolerance and perseverance. In so doing we strive to respect and honor the humanity of others, ensure that each person’s actions have a positive effect on the whole, and create inner contentment that enables us to face personal and global challenges.

For the Bhutanese generosity is considered the highest form of reciprocity. Generosity is a person’s visible act that shows his or her utmost appreciation for the blessings of life. All people can be generous but in order to do so we must address our relationship with materialism, individualism and the pursuit of wealth.

The Bhutanese reject the accumulation of wealth because they believe that this leads people to become imprisoned by materialism and

individualism and consequently to lose sight of how these affect others and the environment.

The other day I was listening to a news report discussing how people were disgruntled about the type of rewards they were receiving from their credit cards. As I listened it was so apparent that we are controlled by materialism and privilege. To be disgruntled because of the type of reward one gets when using a credit card in a world in which few people have access to credit cards or in some cases even money, is perplexing.

Today millions of young people in over 130 countries are protesting that materialism is more valued than the health of the planet. Like the young people of today Jesus criticize those who filled their granaries at the expense of others. He was often judged by the elite for condemning the accumulation of wealth. Many of Jesus' parables challenged the ancient world's materialism and greed and people's relationship with money. According to Jesus the building up of wealth and an attachment to profit making dehumanizes and excludes people and impedes our ability to be generous and kind, thus creating an unjust imbalance of wealth driven by selfish gain.

How do we be generous in such a world? Generosity was a central value of the early Christian movement. Jesus taught that, "You can share even if you have a little" and via many of his letters Paul encouraged generosity. In 1 Timothy the Christian community was encouraged to "be generous and ready to share." Paul called the early Christians to share freely what they had with others. Globally, generosity is about endeavoring to find a healthy relationship and balance between the economy and the care of the earth and its people.

Personally, generosity expresses our deepest gratitude for our blessings. It is about paying our gratitude forward.

The second value of personal happiness according to the Bhutanese is one's ethics. Simply stated ethics refers to how we conduct ourselves in the world. It is more than just being friendly, loving and kind; it is about behaving decently. It involves honesty, courtesy and treating others with

utmost consideration especially those you do not like, or whose views are different from your own.

When Jesus taught in the hills with hundreds gathered around him, I can imagine that some agreed with his teachings and others not so much. Yet in the parable of the loaves and fishes everyone was fed no matter their like or dislike of Jesus or what they themselves believed. Jesus demonstrated his own moral character of honesty, fairness, and truthfulness by feeding all people not just those who believed in him or supported his views.

For Jesus' the ethical principles of justice, fairness, and beneficence were at the heart of his vision of God's kingdom. We might ask ourselves: Do we live decently with each other in this community? Do we demonstrate fairness, truthfulness and honesty and are our actions just and kind? I can well imagine communal happiness arising when collectively we act morally and justly.

The third value of personal happiness is tolerance. Personal, collective and global happiness depend on being tolerant, inclusive and accepting. As we are all aware intolerance runs rampant in this world and is utterly destructive.

Lack of tolerance is evident as conflicts and war continue to escalate resulting in massive loss of life and displacement of tens of thousands of people, as gun violence intensifies, as bullying persists, as hatred between religious groups increases, and prejudice against the LGBTQ2+ community continues. This intolerance is summed up by author John Irving who wrote, "It is not simply intolerance that we face, but tolerance of intolerance, which allows the intolerance to exist."

Intolerance is an outcome of self-righteous attitudes about one's own beliefs, opinions, culture, status and sexuality with little regard for other people's customs, beliefs, lifestyles and religious traditions. It sets us solidly for or against others and it leads us to take sides and become increasingly narrow-minded and arrogant. "The many factors which divide us," says the Dalai Lama, "are actually much more superficial than those

we share. Despite all the things that differentiate us – race, language, religion, gender, wealth and so on – we are all equal concerning our fundamental humanity.”

Tolerance is acceptance, respect and appreciation of the diversity of our world’s cultures, forms of expression and ways of being human. It is about accepting the reality that human beings are naturally diverse in their appearance, situation, speech, faith, behaviour and values, and we all have the right to live in peace as we are.

When Jesus ate meals with others, he demonstrated the ultimate expression of God’s inclusive love. At his table one could find Jews interacting with Gentiles, the upper-class sharing bread with outcasts, women eating with men, and the free sitting with slaves. What was of importance to Jesus was each person’s dignity and humanity.

I am deeply proud of St. David’s for being a community of faith that strongly demonstrates the value of tolerance.

The fourth value for personal happiness according to Gross National Happiness is perseverance, the ability to keep on keeping on no matter what we are required to face in life. There is little doubt that we are living in challenging times and life is often complex and overwhelming. Exhaustion and despair are common experiences as is the intensifying climate of fear and aggression. How then do we keep going, how do we remain grounded and steadfast individually and as a community? How do we not lose our way or get swept away by a negative current?

Jesus encouraged perseverance when he said, “so I tell you, ask—it’ll be given to you; seek—you’ll find; knock—I’ll be open to you. Rest assured. Everyone who asks receives; everyone who seeks finds; and for one who knocks it is opened.” We must persevere in our asking, seeking and knocking until we receive, find or have doors open for us. We know that sometimes we will be buffeted, criticized, opposed, and attacked, and we will struggle and fall. But when we face the challenges of life, never buckling under the pressure, and keep on keeping on despite criticism, opposition and overwhelming obstacles, we are persevering.

St. David's is 59 years old and who you are today is not who you were in the past. But you are alive and active as a congregation because of your perseverance, and your care for and commitment to this community. We are a church connected by faith and hope, by the vision and message of Jesus, and by our need to belong and be in relation with others. Adrienne Clarkson ended one of her Massey lectures with these wise words:

"What is the paradox of citizenship? It is that we are most fully human, most truly ourselves, most authentically individual, when we commit to community." Whether we sing in the choir, volunteer, attend book studies, lead worship, teach children and youth, make coffee, or sit in a pew, we are individuals intersecting ourselves in the interplay of community life. I believe that our interconnectedness, our hope for the future, our struggle to sustain ourselves, and our dreams will be best served by a happiness that we create together through generosity, good moral behaviour, tolerance and perseverance.

Rather than focus only on the state of this congregation's material well-being let us focus on our collective heart well-being knowing that what you do and do not do, profoundly affects every other person in this community.

Happy people want happiness for others, people who feel blessed pay it forward, people who are loved, love others, and people who live their faith, inspire others. Remember, that each of us is ONE with all living things, and our life is an adventure of holding hands with more and more people in the great circle of life. This circle of interconnectedness has no beginning and no end, just infinite connections of divine love, generosity, kindness, perseverance, and tolerance all feeding a deep contentment so that no matter what we face we remain happy. With each new embrace our world and community grow, our heart expands, and our happiness deepens. May this be so for us at St. David's.