

The Fruitful Life

“My Father is glorified by this, that you bear much fruit and become my disciples.” John 15:8

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We’ve talked a lot these past many months about the pandemic and the many suffocating effects it has had on the rhythm of our lives. And, to be sure, many people have suffered quite a lot. But where there are curses, there usually are blessings too; and one such blessing is that, as people sheltered themselves from the storm of the virus, they have looked for new ways to engage their minds and bodies. A strategy some people have explored at home is to learn new things through online education.

One creative digital offering that attracted millions of viewers during this pandemic year is an online psychology class offered by a Yale psychology professor entitled the “the Science of Well-Being” or, more colloquially, “the happiness class.” Even before the pandemic, the class was the most popular in Yale’s 317-year history, enrolling more than 1,000 Yale undergraduates. But since last March, 3.3 million people around the globe have taken the class online. I was sufficiently intrigued by all the buzz about this, that I signed up myself and watched a number of the online lectures.

The professor’s name is Laurie Santos, and she has built her career studying the science of what makes people happy – the “science of well-being,” she calls it. Although there are some short papers and quizzes, the primary homework is for students to commit to various daily practices that, Santos contends, science proves will increase a person’s well-being: practices like gratitude, meditation, savoring life’s joys rather than obsessing over work all the time, practicing random acts of kindness, and paying attention to other people and to the importance of relationships.

I confess that, as a Christian, I found much of this to be a little “ho-hum.” Those of us who try to center our lives on Jesus Christ have long believed in these very same practices, and we learned about them in church. And while I’m sure Jesus is delighted to know that modern psychology is confirming the soundness of

his teachings about gratitude, prayer, and caring for others, it is a bit amusing that everyone is acting as if this admittedly charismatic and very smart psychology professor from Yale is the first person to have discovered these insights.

Another aspect of Professor Santos' course is a critique of some prevailing cultural notions of what makes people happy: notions that encourage young people to pursue money, stuff, and social prestige as the key to happiness. Again, while I applaud Professor Santos' efforts to debunk these myths, so that Yale students do not reflexively believe that a high net worth or academic achievement or social status assures their happiness, even the most casual reader of the gospels knows that here, too, Jesus devoted his entire life to making this very same critique. Long ago, both in word and deed, Christ taught that human flourishing consists more in giving than taking, and that humbling serving others brings a fulfillment that pushing your way to the top will not.

But here is where the parallels between Professor Santos' "happiness class" and the Christian vision of human destiny end. For the single biggest difference between these two approaches to human flourishing is that Santos defines "happiness" strictly in terms of *subjective* human feelings—in other words, "happiness" is whatever makes a particular person feel content and fulfilled. She offers no objective theory of human fulfillment and makes no attempt to connect human activity to some larger purpose, good, or value that exists outside of human consciousness. On her view, the world is a cold, indifferent, even hostile, place, with no purpose or meaning other than what we give to it, and the human project is merely to bide our time seeking as many "happy experiences" as we can get in the short life we're given.

The Christian vision of human flourishing, by contrast, is rather different. According to our Scriptures, God, not humanity, is at the center of the story, and human fulfillment is found not in mere subjective experiences of pleasure or happiness, but rather in participating in the self-giving love that is the life of God. On the Christian view, there *is* an objective reality that is larger than the human self, more important than human desire, and more enduring than our fleeting happiness – and that is an eternal God whose deepest desire is to heal this broken world and love all of Creation back into wholeness.

And the good news for humanity, according to this Christian vision, is that what God wants more than anything is to take us along for the ride, all of us, and to invite us to partner with Him in building a Kingdom that is centered not on human notions of pleasure or personal preference, but on the very love commandment we heard in today's lesson, and that was and is embodied in the life

of the Risen Christ.

When you look at things this way, human flourishing is not about what makes us happy in the short term. Indeed, you'll notice that Jesus never talks about personal "happiness" per se. Jesus' focus is singularly on God's vision of a new order, a new and abundant life for all of humanity, and how we may be a part of it. And so, as we heard in today's lesson from the fifteenth chapter of John's gospel, Jesus doesn't teach his followers to be *happy* so much as he teaches them to be *fruitful*. God is glorified, Jesus says, when we "bear much fruit."

To be *fruitful* is to acknowledge that God has blessed us with certain gifts—be they talents, skills, passions, opportunities, relationships, experiences, or whatever—and the question then becomes how we are going to honor and make the most of these gifts, not merely for our own satisfaction, but for the common good. To be fruitful is to recognize that we are each a part of God's larger project of renewing His garden, and that our role is to cultivate, grow and use the various fruits we've been given toward the betterment of the Garden that is God's whole creation. And if we do that, what Christ promises us, is not human happiness as such, but rather a divine joy, the "complete joy" we receive by participating with God in the creative project of redemption.

The paradox of Christianity is thus that we find our truest identity as God's children when we give up on our selfish preoccupation with our "own happiness," and begin instead to love, serve and bear fruit for God and others. As C.S. Lewis once quipped, if you're interested in happiness I would not recommend Christianity. I did not become Christian to be happy, he once said, for I always knew a good bottle of Port would do that. I became Christian so I could be freed from my own feeble efforts at finding happiness, and instead be found by God and receive the joy He freely offers to those who come to Him.

One of the central purposes of the Church, on this view, is to be a place where we can get over ourselves and instead pursue fruitful lives in service to God and others. Thus, in church, we say prayers of thanksgiving so that we can practice gratitude; in church, we sing songs of praise (at least when there is no pandemic) so that we can feel the joy of God's presence in our hearts; in church, we confess our sins so that we can practice humility and recognize our dependence on the God who sustains us; in church, we pray for one another so that we can bear one another's burdens in empathy and kindness; in church, we offer up our treasure when the collection plate comes around so that we can experience the liberating power of generosity; and in church, we re-dedicate ourselves to seeing the needs of others, seeking to meet them, and working toward a social order marked by justice,

compassion, and decency toward all.

Church is not just a social occasion for Sunday mornings. Church is where we learn how to be fruitful followers of Christ, and how to cultivate and use our gifts in service to others.

Learning to bear fruit is not always easy, of course; nor does it inevitably lead to the results we expect. So, we shouldn't lose heart if we don't see immediate or unambiguously good results from our efforts. God's time is not our time, and his ways are not our ways. We call it "faith" precisely because we trust in the unseen, and place our hope in a future that only God knows. But while it is often hard to see the Kingdom toward which we are striving, we do know this much: we do know *whom* we must follow if we are to get there. May the grace of our Lord Jesus Christ be your guide, my friends, and may your lives be not merely happy, but fruitful as well. By all means count your blessings, but then in return be a blessing to everyone you meet. Amen.