

Gratitude for a Good Life

Mark 8:14-21

You may not realize this, but you and I are among the happiest people on this planet. Granted, there are days when it would hardly ring true, but according to the World Happiness Index Report, the U.S. is ranked #15 out of 158 countries measuring the contentment of each population. The World Happiness Report¹ isn't some gimmicky stunt; it actually is an ongoing U.N.-sponsored research project to help shape public policies around the globe measuring the basic elements determining a quality of life (e.g., income, health, social support, environment, average span of life, etc.).

Overall, those who are most content live in Switzerland, whose index is slightly above those in Iceland, Denmark, Norway, Canada, Finland, Netherlands, and Sweden—mostly Nordic countries, if this suggests anything. Those on the bottom of the happiness scale are found mainly in Saharan or sub-Saharan Africa, with the lone exceptions of Syria and Afghanistan—countries where violence, poverty, and infectious disease erode the quality of life.

Within the U.S., Connecticut ranks around the middle (#24 out of 51 states) according to the most recent Gallup-Healthways poll.² Where are the happiest Americans, in terms of overall quality of life? Last year, it was in Alaska, followed by Hawaii, South Dakota, Wyoming, and Montana. According to this annual survey, the unhappiest populations in descending order, are in Alabama,

¹ John Helliwell, Richard Layard, & Jeffrey Sachs (eds.), *World Happiness Report 2015*, United Nations Sustainable Development Solutions Network, April 2015. www.worldhappiness.report

² *State of American Well-being 2014*, Gallup-Healthways Well-being Index, February 2015, www.info.healthways.com

Mississippi, Ohio, Indiana, Kentucky, with the least content people living in West Virginia. There are many reasons for a particular ranking, but economics, healthcare access and utilization, and living environments certainly impact the quality of life.

So, do you sense that you have a good life? I would imagine most of us would concur—life is pretty good for us (especially in comparison to others). Beyond the basics, though, this may be harder to evaluate. Individual differences being what they are in terms of income-level, employment, state of one's health, social location, quality of relationships, support systems, stress level and balance in life—all of these play a role in our personal outlook and quality of life.

As a rule, we usually assume that any type of loss results in less happiness or a poorer quality of life. If we look back on the past twelve months and it's included several medical appointments and a diagnosis or two, immediately we assume it's been a difficult year. Others will sympathize with us for what we've gone through. Or if you've lost a job and had to find another—that's often viewed as a loss. Or if it's been unusually stressful in other ways, then we complain we haven't been at our best or it's been a miserable stretch. Again, some loss we've experienced based on what our expectations are for what life should be means, then, a lower quality of life. We aren't as happy as we could be.

But is this always true? Does suffering through hardship (whatever it is) always result in a lower quality of life? Or is this only a perception—a mindset that we choose to associate with it? Is it necessarily bad to endure stress if it leads us to sharpen our skills, to accomplish certain things, or prioritize matters in our life—to be more

organized and efficient, perhaps? Even some of our hardest times can be enlightening, if not teachable moments that help us reframe our thinking about what we should be doing with our life or in our relationships or in the use of our time. Even suffering the loss of a loved one—as great and impactful as that is—or certainly facing the near-term possibility of our own passing—can force us to come to terms with things that we’ve neglected or haven’t addressed or to make decisions or take actions that are beneficial for our most important relationships, in terms of communication, or settling differences, or expressing more affection and care, and the like. Upsetting and stressful it might be, but not necessarily terrible for us. Again, these aren’t bad things to be feared; instead, they often improve the quality of life as we wish it to be, even if we’re in the process of losing some other part of who we are in life. We look for the good in the bad. And for that, we can be grateful for a good life.

That said, the mindset of scarcity and loss, though, is a nagging problem and persistent presence. It’s almost a default setting in our brains. When we fear change coming in our lives, particularly a loss, a mindset of scarcity takes over. When scarcity is perceived as real, it’s easy to obsess over things, it’s easy to become anxious and upset, even depressed and despairing, which then throws us emotionally off balance. That’s when we say things we don’t mean and react to situations caustically or make our bed with misery. Of course, there are a thousand ways in which we lose perspective, or fear a loss, or feel stress or anxiety, or resentment gets the better of us to where the worst thoughts suddenly dominate our minds and outlook. Gratitude

and contentment is hardly what we feel and the “good life” we normally have can suddenly seem anything but.

This story from Mark’s gospel hints at these sorts of upsets and a scarcity of perspective. The episode just read lies in the middle of a larger narrative which includes a number of healings, as well as one of the versions of the feeding of the multitude, interrupted by a confrontation between Jesus and the Pharisees, whose animus toward him seemed to be frequent and merciless.

In the flow of the story, the disciples had just witnessed this roundabout between Jesus and the Pharisees and while they were casting off to cross the Sea of Galilee, one of them noticed they hadn’t brought enough provisions to feed everyone in the boat (which seems odd, if not ironic, since this immediately followed the story of the feeding of the multitude). What they now counted among them was one solitary loaf—hardly enough to feed a boatload of people. Of course, one should read this story metaphorically, simply because of the association the early church would make with the one loaf and their common practice in the Eucharist, or Lord’s Supper.

However, as a story in and of itself, it speaks to the unnecessary alarm and fear of scarcity inherent in the disciples’ worry over what they were to eat. They were, once again, afraid of not having their needs met—that they suffered from a mindset of scarcity. Jesus’ response addressed their lack of faith:

Why are you talking about having no bread? Do you still not perceive or understand? Are your hearts hardened? Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember?

It would seem, the rather sharp tenor of this retort suggests there may have been some carry over from the Pharisees, even as Jesus

expressed his exasperation with his own disciples. Yet, it wasn't for their lack of preparation as we might think, but for their lack of understanding of what had just transpired in feeding the massive crowd. Here, they just experienced an incredible moment of shared abundance (something for which they were exceedingly grateful) and yet, obviously, they once again fell into their default state over their fear of scarcity. He had to teach them the lesson all over again.

Not to be overlooked, it's interesting how similar this scene was to the frustration Moses expressed over the Israelites' complaints about going hungry in the wilderness. Both situations spoke to the nature of providence, prudent people, and "potluck suppers." That is, when it appears that there is a deficit, or there is scarcity, if one views it prudently, there is always enough to go around when people relax and live into the moment, and stop worrying about what may or may not have and focus instead on who they're with. That's what feeds the soul. In the desert, manna arrived only when it was needed. It melted away to thwart anyone's attempt at hoarding it—obviously a metaphor for trusting each day to take care of itself.

In feeding the multitude, enough food was present once people began to share in small groups what they had brought for themselves, with Jesus and the disciples providing a model of thoughtful sharing. The inclination toward selfishness and hoarding diminished and all were satisfied.

As much as you and I were taught in Sunday School that Jesus miraculously manufactured enough food to feed thousands—that makes for great drama, but it misses the point. Jesus wasn't showing off superhuman abilities by instantly producing enough food for

thousands. Instead, the feeding of the multitude was done *by the multitude*, once Jesus broke them of their mindset of scarcity and their tendency to selfishly hide what they brought for themselves.

What they experienced was a teachable moment about how divine providence works, i.e., through the hands of sharing people. Instead of fretting over what you may not have, think about what you do have and who you're with! Rather than hoarding or gluttony, or competing for or fighting over resources, sharing fairly and prudently is the way everyone benefits and caring community develops. That's the model for human relations on every level. Typically, that's how households and potluck suppers usually operate. No one leaves with an unmet need if everyone does their part in a sharing community. That's providence in action. That's also how we overcome a mindset of scarcity and recognize the good in our life.

Of course, the Jewish Law, or Torah, emphasized this sharing way repeatedly, not only in terms of providing for one's family and neighbors, but also in relation to assisting the poor, the homeless, as well as foreigners, refugees, immigrants, and others unable to provide for themselves away from their home setting.

It was all about hospitality—divine hospitality—demonstrated through the sharing way of a community—when people take care of each other's needs. It was demonstrated in the feeding of the multitude and in the common purse of the disciples. It was evident when the Good Samaritan crossed social and tribal boundaries to take responsibility for a helpless Judean victimized along the Jericho road.

Jesus underscored this in the Sermon on the Mount:

Do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. ...But strive first for the kingdom of

God and his righteousness (i.e., right-relations), and all these things will be given to you as well. (Mt. 6:25, 33)

The sharing way of community, of watching out for one another, of providing for the betterment of the whole is the model of the realm of God and counters the mindset of scarcity and selfish excess.

Communal care is what goes into operation whenever people are in need. We cultivate a better life by being good to others, by following the sharing way. That's what is good about life. That's how people, even those in want or need, find true happiness and gratitude for a good life. For a good life is about what one does, not what one has. Even when we face a loss, looking for the good takes all our fears away.

Honestly, I can't stand here this morning without making one more point. "Looking for goodness takes all our fears away" has become my mantra over the past week following the violent terrorism in Paris. It is so easy to be fixed on the gloom and paranoia—of what's terribly wrong in the world—magnifying public fear in exactly the way terrorists intend.

It's shameful, in that after months of empathizing with the plight of Syrian refugees, suddenly there is this widespread panic, if not hysteria, throughout the country to "blame the victim" and deny entrance to any potential immigrant.

The irony has not been lost on me that the Statue of Liberty—a gift from France—includes the hallmark words of welcome and hospitality for this immigrant land, penned by Emma Lazarus ("Bring me your tired, your poor, your huddled masses yearning to breathe

free...”). Have we lost perspective from our basic ideals and values? Look for goodness and it will take your fears away.

It seems to me, our gratitude for a good life includes sharing this good life with as many as possible—to extend the reach of this good life as far as possible—to pursue the wisdom and benefits of a good life as much as possible, where people act as the hands of God to provide for needs, to embrace those suffering loss, and to uplift the hearts and spirits of the despairing. When someone is going through a tough time, we come together—we open doors, not close them! We counter the dreadful violence and callousness of this world with an equal commitment to extraordinary goodness and selfless sharing, to prove that kindness is greater than brutality, that love and compassion are more true, lasting, and real to us than terror and fear, and that we stand for goodness and mercy and it shall follow us all the days of our life. That’s gratitude for our good life that feeds the souls of the multitudes.

That is the good life—one that doesn’t focus on what one has, but on what one shares. That’s the good life as it should be defined—a truly good life. That is the good life for which both heaven and earth shall be grateful.

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