
What Is Happiness?

**An article from the *Cathedral Times*
by the Very Reverend Samuel G. Candler,
Dean of the Cathedral of St. Philip**

Someone in Nebraska has apparently won over \$350 million in the Powerball lottery. That figure is a bit misleading. Apparently, if the winner chooses the "lump sum" option, his or her winnings are around \$170 million. Once taxes are settled, someone else has figured that the amount comes to around \$120 million. Will that person be happy?

Another news research team has studied the lives of lottery winners. They claim that 70% of the winners have lost all their money within a few years of winning. 70 percent! Did winning the lottery make those folks happy? Winning money turned out not to be what they were looking for, after all.

I have not read the book yet, and maybe I'll not ever get to it, but Darrin McMahon has written *Happiness: A History*. When Jim Holt reviewed this book recently, he wrote, "The History of the idea of happiness can be neatly summarized in a series of bumper sticker equations: HAPPINESS=LUCK (Homeric), HAPPINESS=VIRTUE (classical), HAPPINESS=HEAVEN (medieval), HAPPINESS=PLEASURE (Enlightenment) and HAPPINESS=A WARM PUPPY (contemporary). Does that look like progress? Darrin McMahon doesn't think so." (NY Times Book Review, Feb 19, 2006, page 20).

McMahon discusses the phenomenon of a "set point" in human happiness. Apparently, happiness is somewhat stable over time. Folks have changes in happiness for better or for worse; we win the lottery or we lose a dear friend. But then we snap back after a few months to whatever our "set point" is. When I look at my friends in the world, I believe that theory. Some people are happier than others, and it doesn't matter whether they have suffered loss or not. Some people are just sadder than others, and it doesn't matter whether they have won the lottery or not.

Last year, I did read a helpful book called *What Happy People Know*, by Dan Baker and Cameron Stauth. It is still another self-help book, but it contains some helpful notes. For instance, Baker counts twelve qualities of happiness: love, optimism, courage, a sense of freedom, proactivity, security, health, spirituality, altruism, perspective, humor, and purpose. If folks achieve these qualities, says Baker, "they no longer need to search for happiness-it finds them."

This Wednesday, Ash Wednesday in the life of the Christian Church, our community will gather to do something that does not look happy at all. We begin the season of Lent by walking forward and having a priest smudge our foreheads with ash. "Remember that you are dust, and to dust you shall return," the priest will say. Outside observers may well exclaim, "How morbid and sad the Christian Church seems!"

But Christianity contributes another, and critical, element to the human search for happiness. Christianity claims, over time, that what makes human beings happy is being in right relationship with God. It is not winning the lottery, it is not achieving popularity, it is not being accepted at the right job or in the right social circles, it is not having the right friends. It is being right before God.

Being right before God means being truthful and honest about who we are. We take time to confess our shortcomings and our failures. We all have them. Lent gives us a safe opportunity to admit them. But Lent is also the time to realize again

what the true love of God is. And Lent is also the opportunity to take stock of our gifts and talents and resources. What is our purpose in this world? What does God want me to be doing?

These are all the questions of Lent. In fact, they were the questions of Jesus when he spent forty days in the wilderness before he began his ministry. When we ask ourselves these questions, and then listen for the answers, we are "right before God." We are on a road to holiness.

Holiness is the word. For us, there is another answer to the question of happiness. HAPPINESS=HOLINESS. Holy people, who know themselves accurately and who know God accurately, who search and who listen, who serve faithfully right where God has them, they are the happiest people I know. Holy people do not need to search for happiness-happiness finds them.

Sam Candler signature



The Very Rev. Sam Candler