

# Living Happier, Longer

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**Sermon preached by the Rev. Lowell E. Grisham, Rector  
St. Paul's Episcopal Church, Fayetteville, Arkansas  
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**(Luke 17:11-19)** – On the way to Jerusalem Jesus was going through the region between Samaria and Galilee. As he entered a village, ten lepers approached him. Keeping their distance, they called out, saying, "Jesus, Master, have mercy on us!" When he saw them, he said to them, "Go and show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were made clean. Then one of them, when he saw that he was healed, turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, "Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they? Was none of them found to return and give praise to God except this foreigner?" Then he said to him, "Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well."

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I have a prediction. I predict that the Samaritan leper who was healed – the one who suddenly turned back to praise God with a loud voice; who fell at Jesus' feet in an expression of joyful thanksgiving – that man will live longer than the other nine who were healed. I base that prediction on some fascinating research that is going on at the University of Pennsylvania and elsewhere as part of a new movement called "Positive Psychology."

Positive Psychology is the rigorous study of what goes right with people, how and when we flourish, what gives us resilience, and how we achieve fulfillment and meaning. That's not a bad description of what we're up to here at St. Paul's as well.

Maybe you read about the groundbreaking study of a community of 180 nuns, the School Sisters of Notre Dame in Milwaukee, trying to measure their happiness and longevity. Monastics lead remarkably similar lives in many ways. They share routine, shelter and diet. They don't drink to excess or smoke. There are lots of similarities in their life styles. Yet there is wide variation in how long nuns live and how healthy they are.

Listen carefully to these two autobiographical sketches from two novices, each writing in 1932 about taking their final vows.

First, Sister Cecelia: *God started my life off well by bestowing upon me grace of inestimable value.... The past year which I spent as a candidate studying at Notre Dame has been a very happy one. Now I look forward with eager joy to receiving the Holy Habit of Our Lady and to a life of union with Love Divine.*

Next, Sister Marguerite: *I was born on September 26, 1909, the eldest of seven children, five girls and two boys.... My candidate year was spent in the*

*mother-house, teaching chemistry and second year Latin at Notre Dame Institute. With God's grace, I intend to do my best for our Order, for the spread of religion and for my personal sanctification.*

Did you notice the differences? Sister Cecilia used the words “very happy” and “eager joy,” both expressions of effervescent good cheer. Sister Marguerite’s sketch, on the other hand, included not a whisper of positive emotion. Sister Cecilia was still alive in 2002 – ninety-eight years old and never sick a day in her life. Marguerite had a stroke at age fifty-nine, and died soon after.

Researchers read and quantified the amount of positive feeling in 180 similar autobiographical sketches of the sisters. They found that 90 percent of the most cheerful quarter were alive at age eighty-five, but only 34 percent of the least cheerful quarter was. Likewise, 54 percent of the most cheerful were alive at age ninety-four; 11 percent of the least cheerful were.

The study found that the amount of positive feeling expressed in their autobiographical sketch was the only factor that corresponded with their longevity. How devout they seemed, however intellectually complex their writing was, any expressions of unhappiness or of how much they looked forward to the future was irrelevant. It was all about expressing positive emotions.

At the heart of these studies of Positive Psychology is the centrality of our sense of gratification stimulated by meaningful experiences, especially in times of challenge when we must rise to the occasion. One of the key positive emotions is gratitude. Thanksgiving. Appreciation.

When one of the healed lepers “saw that he was healed, [he] turned back, praising God with a loud voice. He prostrated himself at Jesus’ feet and thanked him. And he was a Samaritan. Then Jesus asked, ‘Were not ten made clean? But the other nine, where are they?’ ...Then he said to him, ‘Get up and go on your way; your faith has made you well.’”

Thanksgiving, gratitude, is key to our health and happiness. I want to offer you two gratitude exercises that one of the leaders of Positive Psychology promotes – Martin E. P. Seligman, the author of *Authentic Happiness*.

Exercise 1: Select someone from your past who has contributed to your well-being, someone whom you’ve never fully thanked. Write a one-page letter expressing what that person has meant to you. Take your time. Be detailed. Then find a way to meet face-to-face with that person. No need to say why; a simple “I just want to see you,” will do. Laminate the letter, sit down with that person and read it slowly, with expression and eye contact, and give the person the letter as a gift. Let the other react unhurriedly, and reminisce together about the events that mean so much to you. Dr. Seligman says that his

students report a long-lived, powerful sense of deep gratification and happiness is planted in them after such an exercise.

**Exercise 2:** Set aside five free minutes each night for two weeks. Think back over the day and write down up to five things in your life that you are grateful or thankful for: “Waking up this morning.” “A deep friendship.” “Thanks to God for helping me persevere.” “The Beatles.”

Researchers find measurable changes in life satisfaction and happiness when people try these exercises. When people make the expression of gratitude and thanksgiving an intentional practice in their lives, they experience greater happiness and health.

Participation in meaningful activities contribute more to our well-being than mere entertainment also. One of Dr. Seligman’s students tutored a third-grade nephew in arithmetic, and found “for the rest of the day, I could listen better, I was mellower, and people liked me much more than usual.”

We are into meaning at St. Paul’s, and we strive to create many opportunities for meaningful practice. Tutoring, feeding, nurturing young people; music, prayer, learning and growing. And everything we do is grounded in praise and thanksgiving. We are a Eucharistic community. Eucharist is the Greek word meaning “Thanksgiving.”

I believe that if you throw yourself into the worship and prayer, service and learning that we share here at St. Paul’s, and you cultivate the expression of your positive emotions in those things, you will be happier and healthier.

If you will practice being a Eucharistic person, a person of thanksgiving, you will grow in well-being.

We are entering our annual stewardship campaign. I want to say something that I think is important. Do not pledge to St. Paul’s only out of duty, and certainly not out of guilt or grudgingly.

If you contribute to St. Paul’s, do so out of thanksgiving. First, out of thanksgiving to God for all that you have received from God’s benevolence. Let your gifts to St. Paul’s be a joyful and emotional expression of your gratitude to God. And second, give out of thanksgiving for what this church does to connect people with God and one another, and to serve to increase thanksgiving and happiness not only among ourselves, but also toward others. If you give to St. Paul’s, do so with gusto and joy, because you are thankful for all that happens through this church for the well being of so many.

In all things, be joyful, be thankful, be optimistic. God is accomplishing wonderful things through us; ...through you. So many good things come to us as pure circumstance, pure gift. Find ways to express your gratitude and your

positive emotions. Grandma was right: “Count your blessings.” At least five every evening. Be the one-in-ten who turns around in mid-step, gratefully praises God, and comes back to Jesus with concrete expressions of joy and thanksgiving.

And... I have a prediction. If you increase the frequency and intensity of your expressions of joy and gratitude, you’ll live a longer and a happier life.

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**Reference** for this sermon: Martin E. P. Seligman, *Authentic Happiness*, Free Press, NY, NY 2002

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