

“Oh Happy Day!”

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Annabelle Stevens, Larissa Stevens in their book *Change Yourself, Change Your World* say that statistics show that one happy customer will tell 1 other person about their great experience. An unhappy one will tell 7." That’s hard to imagine, but human nature being what it is, I can see how then, that churches that have had some unhealthy experiences cease to grow.

On the other hand, so much of how I try to lead a congregation is not only to have happy experiences but also become *authentically and inherently happy*—It’s obvious. If a congregation is joyful, content, elated, glad, and sometime even euphoric then we can’t wait to tell others about the happy days we are living out at St. Andrew’s, and the days we are looking forward to. So, now, what do we tell our friends and neighbors about our church. Is it a happy place to be? Do we have happy experiences? Is this congregation becoming an authentically happy congregation? Let’s explore the idea this morning. We know what happiness is. We just have a hard time putting it into words. As one writer put it, happiness is a fuzzy concept. That’s true in a congregation, too.

For example, when the Psalmist said, “I was glad when they said to me, “Let us go into the house of the Lord!” we know what that means, even though we did not live 1500 years ago in Jerusalem or ever spoke Hebrew. So, let’s work on it somewhat to see if we can get a handle on what it means to be happy in ourselves and especially today, in our congregation.

Lorin Hopper’s idea from her book *Wake Up Happy is that*, "If you wish to be happy right from the beginning of your day, then it is about time to leave behind your past." Does that relate to a congregation, too? We agree that our past has some wonderful memories and future will carry into it some wonderful legacies. Yet, we know, today is another day. And, day by day we are slowly arriving at the future we make for ourselves, hopefully consistent with God’s plan for us.

That’s how we grow into a promising, hopeful, and happy congregation. We come as one, into the peace and unity of a congregation, where we can be whatever it is God has created us to be. As St. Paul taught, we are out of one comes the

many, out of the many comes the one. We are all members of one in the body of Christ.

Just while I was sitting down to write this sermon, I received a text from someone up until this week I had not heard from in more than three years. We had been discussing whether I could return to a former congregation to officiate at a funeral for someone I spend a lot of time with when I was there. I had to graciously offer my regrets. But then, just as I despaired that I could not be there with that family, I received this from my friend:

*“All the time...God is good! We [at this church] would all love to see you. Maybe when retirement comes [smiley face]! You brought hope and a sense of peace back to our congregation. Life is good!”*

There is nothing that gives me more joy than to know that there are those lives I touched along the way who have found a new reason to participate in the joyful interconnectedness of their church. The text began with an affirmation of God’s goodness all the time, even when things get confused sometimes, even when people get angry, even when the organization takes place over relationships, even when people find themselves at odds with one another, and, even when there is a loss of hope for the future, or when peace seems like a distant memory.

A congregation that experiences happy days understands the ancient human quality of gladness and that is more than an emotion or a state of being. It knows that defining their happiness is not essentially in the words they say, nor even in the status of its growth. A congregation knows it is happy when inexplicably, and that’s a key word, the people of the congregation feel connected because they behave in understandable Christian responses in their experiences with one another. Thus, the happy church is the good church—a church in which Christian people fulfill their Christian nature in an excellent way. You can’t verbally explain it easily. You just see it in the beauty of the building and grounds, in the delight of many kinds of people at any given event, in the expressions of sympathy, and in the celebration of each other’s future. Words cannot convey all there is in an embrace, or a smile, or a gaze. Prayers catch only this and that of our congregation everyday while our collective heartbeats are in sync with all that is dear, passionate, terrible, joyful, recurrent, or turbulent throughout our lives. We are bound not so much by the words we say, but by the deeds we perform. We find

reasons to celebrate nearly everything, from a birth to a birthday, from youthful endeavors to old age now achieved, from a remodeled room to a Christmas event for everyone who wants to can come for free. We like horns, guitars, bells flutes, drums, and strings. We like an organ that can howl and piano that can ping. We celebrate silence and ovation. Suddenly, on one mystical day we start singing about joy again—we hear the ancient spirit in our souls. We have joy unspeakable and full of glory—and the half we proclaim and sing, has never yet been told! That is when we know—the happy days are here at St. Andrew's.

A happy congregation expends its energy on each other in an abundant love that splashes over to others beyond us. To experience happiness in a congregation is a response to an invitation I read earlier-- to come and be one, to Come AND be one, become one, Be one, BE. People in a congregation cannot make each other be happy. Some people just aren't happy and don't plan to change. We must love them with the love of Christ anyway. But there comes a time when a congregation realizes the happiness they strive for in their heart, and among their families, and in their community rises from a common spirit of unity and purpose. They have arrived at the place on the highest rung of their corporate existence. It is that they have discovered by experience and relationships once again what happiness is when we glorify God and enjoy God forever from the gratitude for God's grace and our humble place in God's creation.