

Homily for the 32nd Sunday in Ordinary Time

Recently, at our annual priest workshop down in Hunt Valley, we had many wonderful presentations. One in particular was given by the Spitzer Center, a foundation run by Jesuit Father, Robert Spitzer. The title of the presentation was “The Four Levels of Happiness”. In a nutshell, they can be summarized with four C-words: candy, competition, contribution, and Christ. Let me explain a little more. The first level of happiness is all about pleasure and the physical senses. It includes those material things or experiences, like chocolate, coffee, or a day off – all which make me very happy.

The second level of happiness makes us feel good about ourselves because it includes achievement at an endeavor undertaken. It includes things like winning at a game, finishing an exercise workout, or getting a job with the resulting financial success. Now, although the first two levels are certainly sources of real happiness, the happiness they provide is always short-lived and self-focused. In other words, these levels only produce within us a happiness that will last for a short time and only involves me. So, if we want more happiness here, we have to keep going back or accomplishing again and again.

On the contrary, the higher levels of happiness are more enduring, in particular because they expand beyond me, myself, and I. So, the third level of happiness recognizes the truth that we are all hardwired for love. In other words, we all need to give and to receive love. Thus, this level centers on relationships with other people, and the happiness we feel in really contributing to their lives, including family, friends, fellow parishioners, and others. Think of how happy you feel if you've ever served a meal at a soup kitchen, or helped an elderly family member, or helped a friend through a tough time. It is deeply satisfying, and we all need a variety of healthy relationships of varying degrees to be truly happy.

Finally, the fourth, and highest level of happiness, is to be found in our Creator. It is said that each person is created with a God-shaped hole within. Now, we can fill that hole with other things or experiences from those lower levels of happiness, which many people do – it's part of being human. But ultimately, they will not last and will not satisfy the deepest longings of the human heart. To the contrary, God's love is eternal and unconditional for each person. And only His love can fill that deep, deep well, or God-shaped hole, in which we need to be loved always and accepted just as we are. Therefore, only God's love can provide ultimate happiness for all of eternity because it never runs out.

So, where do you find your happiness? Where do any of us find our happiness?

Pope John Paul II taught that “Human love consists in self-giving which is essential for personal self-realization and happiness.” And the Second Vatican Council taught:

“Man, who is the only creature on earth which God willed for itself, cannot fully find himself except through a sincere gift of himself”. In other words giving of self is what leads to true happiness. As an example from my own life, I can tell you that I love my first cup of hot coffee of my day off. But, my day off is over – usually way too quickly. However, the time of personal prayer with the Lord on that day off, or sitting down and talking with a parishioner or someone in need, or celebrating Reconciliation or any the sacraments, is always way more fulfilling – because it’s a gift of myself. As a priest, it’s in giving that true satisfaction and lasting happiness are borne. And the same is true in marriages, in families, and in each of our individual lives. It’s in giving that we receive – happiness, among other things.

And that’s one thing we can learn from the widow in today’s Gospel. As we heard, Jesus pointed out to His disciples how the crowd put money into the Temple treasury, including many rich people who put in wads of cash apparently. But when a poor widow puts in “two small coins worth a few cents”, Jesus says that she contributed more than all the others to the treasury. Jesus can say this, not because the monetary amount was greater – it wasn’t, but because she, from her poverty contributed all she had. In other words, she made a gift of her very self, because she gave not just from the extra or the surplus, but from what would cost her – what she needed to live on.

My friends, if you've been stuck focusing on lower levels of happiness, it's time to aim higher. That widow gave of herself to the Temple. But in John Chapter 2, Jesus proclaims to the Jews, "Destroy this temple and in three days I will raise it up", which He could say because He was speaking about the Temple of his body – of His very self. In this way, Jesus invites each of us to make a total gift of ourselves to Him – to surrender ourselves to Him in love. And while it's important to have a healthy balance of all four areas of happiness in our lives – nothing is a substitute for a real, personal, daily, lived relationship with our Lord Jesus Christ. He is the cause of our joy and the ultimate meaning of happiness. God bless you.