

Happiness: The Christian Faith's Ultimate Goal - Part 2

Happiness is central to historical Christian faith and practice. But what does it look like and how should it be experienced?

There are at least three common headings under which joy or happiness are often considered:

1. The experience of pleasures or delights, whether carnal or intellectual, aesthetic or appetitive.
2. "Eudaimonia," the term Aristotle used to describe a state of blessedness that is multi-faceted and related to one's whole life, personal and communal, pertaining to both intellect and appetites.
3. Non-circumstantial joy that rises above difficult circumstances, a sort of irrational happiness in the face of daunting or even painful realities, even amid suffering.

In my experience, Christians too quickly claim non-circumstantial joy while discounting the first two categories of pleasure or happiness.

Such a rush to a sort of unhappy happiness as the meaning of Christian joy gives too much fodder for Nietzsche's critique of Christianity that I described previously.

It may be that category No. 1 - the happiness arising from delights and pleasures - requires a great deal of maturity and human development to really get these delights.

In other words, it requires personal growth, a sort of basic human maturity in facing one's own fears and fear of judgment as well as the self-hatred and shame with which our Christian tradition too often belabors us.

The point here is simply that "happiness" as it relates to pleasure is, in fact, a very legitimate Christian endeavor, for being a Christian is about becoming fully human, fully alive, with the most joyous expression of our capacities known and

experienced.

For example, in our fast-food consumerist world, we are quickly losing the art of eating. And yet to enjoy the art of the meal, we must grow in numerous skills and abilities.

It is not small matter to cultivate the capacity to enjoy good food around well-appointed tables adorned with good conversation, hospitality and temperance, patience and provocation to love and good deeds.

Some of the greatest joys I have known are around good tables with good friends where we've talked long into the night, imbibed temperately and done all things with love and hospitality.

To enjoy delights and pleasures well is, in fact, a learned gift, a cultivated grace.

Similarly with regard to category No. 2 above, it may be that in our varied squelching of passion in life, we forget that we were created out of divine love and creativity, and that "the glory of God is a human being fully alive," as Irenaeus asserted.

I like a story supposedly from the Talmud that illustrates Irenaeus' contention: A man named Akiba, on his death bed, confessed to the rabbi his sense of failure, that he was fearful of facing the judgment of God, confessing that he had not lived as did Moses.

The man began to weep, and the rabbi leaned in and whispered, "God will not judge Akiba for not being Moses. God will judge Akiba for not being Akiba."

There is a sort of liberty and freedom in that story that occasions a deep sort of joy, akin to that of which Frederick Buechner speaks when he insisted that one's vocation is where one's deep gladness and the world's great need meet.

To experience this is not an indulgence that needs to be squelched in some pious rejection of passion in life, but may, I think it more likely, be part and parcel of what it means to be a child of God.

Perhaps one lesson learned from Nietzsche: Let us give ourselves a break from our indulgent self-loathing, loosen up, live a little, and learn how to grow up by tasting a bit of joy.

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Editor's note: This is the second article in a two-part series. Part one is available [here](#).