
Exceeding All Our Desire

A sermon by the Rev. Theophus “Thee” Smith

In the name of God: *Father, Son, and Holy Spirit*, Amen!

Well, friends, have I got a proposition for you today! How many of us would be willing to accept an opportunity to become just 10% happier? Just 10% happier than you are now; that’s the proposal. Not 50, 75, or 90% happier—not that much! I assume you’re already at least 15 or 20% happy with your life. Even so you might not want to presume asking to be as much as 80 or 90-something percent happy. And no way should we dare pursue anything as high as being 100% happy. And why not?

Here’s why: Because the requirements for getting that much happiness are going to be correspondingly high. That’s right: If you heard the conditions for that level of happiness—well! Any one of us would be too daunted or intimidated just to consider doing what it takes to be that happy. But to consider being just 10% happier; well, in that case the requirements are far less fearsome, far more attainable; indeed the terms are more reasonable and seem within our reach. So we’re more likely to say, ‘Sure, I’ll give it a try. What do I have to do?’

And now, if you’ve been reading the New York Times Best Sellers List then you know what I’ve just been doing. I’ve been tongue-in-cheek and ‘riffing’—or improvising—on the recent book by the journalist and news anchor, Dan Harris. The book is entitled, *10% Happier*; also tongue-in-cheek by the way. But that’s just the first couple of words. The full title goes on like this: *10% Happier: How I Tamed [Tamed!] the Voice in My Head, Reduced Stress Without Losing My Edge, and Found Self-Help That Actually Works—A True Story*. Wow! That’s the full title. All that was involved in making the author 10% happier. Now what’s the story here, and why are you more likely to read a book about self-help that promises to make us only *10% Happier*?

Well, to get the full story I invite you to read the book or, more immediately this week, ‘google’ on the internet the following keywords: first, the author’s name, Dan Harris; second, the short title of the book, *10% Happier*; and third, the following three words: cocaine panic attack. Well, here’s the story from the author’s own words.

In my early thirties, as a young reporter for ABC News, I spent many years covering wars. When I got back from one particularly long and hairy run in Baghdad, I became depressed. In an act of towering stupidity, I began to self-medicate, dabbling with cocaine and ecstasy. In hindsight, it was an attempt, at least partly, to recreate some of the thrill of the war zone.

A side-effect of all of this, as my doctor later explained to me, was that the drugs increased the level of adrenaline in my brain, which is what, in all likelihood, produced a panic attack I had on live television in 2004 on Good Morning America. The shrink I consulted about this decreed in no uncertain terms that I needed to stop doing drugs—immediately. Faced with the potential demise of my career, breaking this habit was a pretty obvious call .

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I never in a million years thought I'd be the type of person who'd say this, but my answer is . . . meditation. I had always assumed that meditation was for robed gurus, acid-droppers, and people who keep yurts in their backyard. But then I heard about the explosion of scientific research that shows the practice has an almost laughably long list of health benefits, from lowering your blood pressure to boosting your immune system to essentially rewiring your brain for happiness.

I started with five minutes a day, and very quickly noticed three benefits: 1. Increased focus, 2. A greater sense of calm, and 3. A vastly improved ability to jolt myself out of rumination and fantasies about the past or the future, and back to whatever was happening right in front of my face.

Over time (I've now been at it for about four years and do 35 minutes a day), an even more substantial benefit kicked in: I created a different relationship to the voice in my head. You know the voice I'm talking about. It's what has us reaching into the fridge when we're not hungry, checking our e-mail while we're in conversation with other people, and losing our temper only to regret it later.

The ability to see what's going on in your head at any given moment without reacting to it blindly—often called “mindfulness”—is a superpower. I'm certainly not arguing that meditation is a panacea [a cure-all for everything]. I still do tons of stupid stuff – as my wife will attest. But the practice has definitely made me happier, calmer, and nicer. www.amazon.com/10-Happier-Self-Help-Actually-Works-A/dp/product-description/0062265423/ref=dp_proddesc_0?ie=UTF8&n=283155&s=books

Well that's the story—the “true story” that Dan Harris tells about how he remains an agnostic, on the one hand. On the other hand he is also a self-confessed meditator: testifying about the benefits that the Buddhist tradition has popularized throughout the world today: a meditation term called, ‘mindfulness.’ But it's the very tone of Harris's testimonial—the tone not of a religious believer but of a skeptic who is nonetheless some kind of convert— that's what makes him more credible, accessible, and compelling for readers like those who frequent the New York Times Best Sellers List.

By the way, those readers are also people like you and me; people whom Dan Harris knows are more likely to attempt 5 minutes of meditation a day—and he says it's the ‘daily-ness’ that matters—rather than starting out with 10, 20 or 30 minutes a day and failing to keep it up. And readers like us are more likely to keep it up if we're anticipating becoming only 10% happier rather than reaching for something too far-out to believe—becoming 50, 75 or 90-something percent happier.

Now right here let's shift gears and connect with our scriptures and prayers for today. It's remarkable right away to notice the connection with our reading from the Book of Acts. What's remarkable is that Dan Harris's tone of urbanity, sophistication, and savvy spirituality could have qualified him to be in ancient Athens on that day described in the Acts of the Apostles.

That was the day when the apostle Paul evangelized his audience during a meeting in the Areopagus, named after Ares the Greek god of war. Mars was the Roman or Latin name of the god, which is why in some translations the meeting place is also called Mars Hill. It was there that the apostle delivered one of his most famous announcements of the gospel of Jesus Christ. (I commend to you, by the way, this translation from the New International Version or NIV.)

“People of Athens! [Paul declared] . . . as I walked around and looked carefully at your objects of worship, I even found an altar with this inscription: to an unknown god. So you are ignorant of the very thing you worship—and this is what I am going to proclaim to you.

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In the past God overlooked such ignorance, but now . . . he has set a day when he will judge the world with justice by the man he has appointed. [And] He has given proof of this to everyone by raising him from the dead.” (Acts 17.22-23, 30-31; NIV)

Now at this point, the Book of Acts tells us, Paul’s audience divided into three types: (1) those who “scoffed” or “sneered” at the resurrection of the dead, (2) others who said, “We will hear you again about this,” and finally (3) some who actually “joined him and became believers” (Acts 17.32-34).

But what if Dan Harris, our 2014 author and sophisticate, had also been among the apostle’s listeners that day? I imagine him as an agnostic who would place himself among Paul’s second group of respondents, those who said, in the NIV translation, “We want to hear you again on this subject.” And indeed, that openness as an agnostic is precisely the attitude that Harris has exemplified. In previous years he was an ABC News reporter assigned by anchor Peter Jennings to report on religion news topics and newsmakers. So he’s interviewed religious figures like the Dalai Lama and Deepak Chopra, but also prominent Christian evangelicals.

Now, what would it have taken for Dan Harris to find himself in the third category of Paul’s respondents; those who actually became believers and followers of Jesus Christ? More to the point, what would shift those of us here today from our similarities with readers of the New York Times Best Sellers Lists; people like us who are challenged to believe in resurrection of the dead, or people who have, sadly or perhaps tragically, become accustomed to minimalist expectations of spirituality? Well, church friends, it’s precisely here that our Collect or opening prayer appointed for today offers spiritual rescue for us. You can find it there at the bottom of page two in our worship booklet:

O God, you have prepared for those who love *you* such good things as surpass our understanding: Pour into our hearts such love towards *you*, that we, loving you in all things and above all things, may obtain your promises, which exceed all that we can desire...[emphasis mine;
www.lectionarypage.net/YearA_RCL/Easter/AEaster6_RCL.html]

Yes, with this prayer we are once again confronted with the challenge of faith. Are we going to believe what scripture announces and today’s Collect affirms—that by loving God we receive such good things as surpass our understanding’—not *minimal* things but superlative and superabundant things?

And then the Collect goes on to pray for more ability to love this God so that, ‘[loving God in all things and above all things, [we] may obtain God’s promises, which *exceed* all that we can desire.’ So what if we are also challenged to love God that awesomely—in all things and above all things? If loving God is also beyond our 5, 10, 15 or 20% abilities—and on too many days that’s true of my own experience, I confess—then we have this reassurance from our gospel appointed for today:

‘I will ask the Father,’ [Jesus declares to his disciples in today’s gospel; ‘I will ask the Father,] and he will give you another Advocate,* to be with you for ever. ¹⁷ This is the Spirit of truth, whom the world cannot receive . . . [so that] those who love me will be loved by my Father, and I will love them and reveal myself to them.’ (John 14.16-17, 21)

Thus we are promised that the Holy Spirit will be the power that enables us beyond our own abilities to love God and inherit God’s promises. “On that day,” Jesus continues in today’s gospel, “you will know that I am in my Father, and you in me, and I in you.”

Now we can conclude by applauding our contemporary seekers and agnostics like Dan Harris. Surely he is to be commended for evangelizing his readers and viewers with meditation as a “superpower”: the power to ‘tame the voice in our head’ and make us 10% happier. We must wish them Godspeed, and yes: explore for ourselves Christian meditation

and contemplative practices; practices like Centering Prayer for example.

But beyond all that, today's gospel affirms, we also have the Holy Spirit as our "Advocate." And that Advocate is not limited to only minimal outcomes of the 10 or 20% variety. Rather it is superlative outcomes that the apostle celebrates in this apostolic declaration in the Letter to the Ephesians (3.20-21):

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, ["abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine,"], to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

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