

In our lives, we all have to answer the question what is it that will give us happiness.

And what we find is that there are some things that give us temporary happiness, true happiness is found when we open ourselves up to doing what God has called us to do.

For years, Eugene Edwards was content running his business, the Atlas Plumbing Company. He had spent 30 years running it, but one day, he closed the door and hung up a sign that said “Gone Out of Business.” It wasn’t because he was forced to close; rather he says, he had to follow his heart.

He climbed into his 1991 burgundy Explorer, and at the time was 50 years old. At this point, after some prayer and God tugging at his heart, he said he turned all his thoughts toward his lifelong dream of being a schoolteacher. He prayed “Lord, you’ve brought me this far, please don’t leave me now.”

As he drove home, he wished Mr. Roy was still alive so he could talk to him. Mr. Roy was Eugene's mentor, his role model. Mr. Roy talked with Gene, asked him questions. Just like he was somebody instead of a scrawny little black kid as he put it.

Gene was about 6 when he found Mr. Roy in Mayfield, South Carolina, where Gene was born. There was a small family-run store in their neighborhood. Out front, the American flag waved right next to the Coca-Cola sign above the screen door. Mr. Roy and some other old-timers usually were there, propped on upside-down nail kegs next to the pot-bellied stove, playing a round of checkers and swapping yarns.

Every day after school, Gene sidled up by the checkerboard to "help out" Mr. Roy with his game. And it was there, at Mr. Roy's elbow, that many of Gene's values were born. It wasn't that his parents didn't teach him things. They did. But as there were 17 kids at home, individual attention was a little hard to come by.

"Eugene," Mr. Roy said one day, "whatta you want to be when you grow up?"

“A teacher,” he fairly blurted out.

In a tone that left no room for doubt, Mr. Roy responded, “Then be one!”

Mr. Roy could see the pitfalls ahead. “Eugene,” he said, dead serious as he wrapped one bony arm around Eugene’s equally thin shoulders, “there will be times when folks will say, “You can’t do that.” Just take that in stride. Then set out to prove ‘em wrong”.

During Eugene’s junior year of high school, his mom passed away and his dad needed him to help care for the younger children. As college now as out of the question, Gene put aside his teacher dream and took up a trade instead - plumbing.

Eugene recalled another of Mr. Roy’s admonitions. “One more thing, Eugene,” he’d said. “Whatever you become, whether you’re a ditch-digger or a schoolteacher, you be the best you can be. That’s all the good Lord asks of us.”

So, Eugene told himself, “If I can’t be a teacher, I’ll be the best plumber in the business.” He learned all he could about the trade. He practiced what he believed - do it right the first time and you don’t have to go back, he told himself. And eventually he had his own business.

Meanwhile he met Annette and they married and reared two fine children. Now his son Michael was completing his Ph.D., and his daughter Monique was a college senior, while Annette had gone back to school several years earlier and became a teacher herself.

Now that day had come when his dream would no longer be denied. Four days after he closed his shop, he started work at Hendrix Drive Elementary School. Not as a teacher, but as a custodian. He traded his wrenches and pipe fittings for brooms and paint brushes. And a 40% reduction in pay. Eugene figured the job would be a good way to test the waters - to see if he could even relate to the youngsters of today.

Eugene hit it off with the students. In the hallways while running the floor polisher, he’d throw them a big high-five and each responded with a wide grin and a “five back-at-you.”

Often, Eugene found a youngster propped up against the wall outside his classroom, having been banished there for misbehavior. “What’za matter, son” Eugene would ask the student, truly concerned. After he had related his current infraction of rules, and Eugene had emphasized his need to comply, he’d go in and talk with his teacher, smoothing the way for a return to the classroom.

What Eugene found was he made a great mediator. Perhaps he thought it was because he could put himself in the mind-set of the youngsters. So many had come from broken homes, being raised by their single moms or by a grandmother. They were hungry for a positive male role model, someone who would show genuine interest in them, show them that they were loved. They desperately needed a Mr. Roy in their lives. He wanted to be that one for them.

At times, that meant being a little strict. He says more than once he pulled a young man over to the side of the hallway and reprimanded him about his baggy pants with no belt, the waist dragging down around his knees and

underwear showing. In fact that's how he met Jeffrey, the young man in the hallway who he smoothed things over with his teacher.

"Wait right here," he told him. From his supply closet he brought a length of venetian-blind cord to run through his belt loops. The next day, Jeffrey came to school wearing a belt. So did the other boys when it came their turn for correction. Unorthodox behavior for a custodian perhaps, but the kids respected his opinion because they knew he cared.

Eugene did a lot of thinking and praying while he polished the floors. "I have a ministry right here as a custodian," he rationalized. "Maybe I don't need to put myself through the rigors of college courses in order to help students."

All the while, he could hear Mr. Roy saying "Never settle for second best Eugene. Whatever you become, you be the best you can be."

One night he ventured to his family, "Looks like I'm gonna have to go to college after all."

His entire family said “Go for it!”

And so, Eugene did. In the fall, he registered for night and weekend courses. He was nervous, thinking would I be the oldest person there, was he too old or too tired to learn the tough subjects?

On top of those worries, working all day then studying until 2 a.m. only to get up at 5:30 was rough. While cleaning those floors, he carried on a running dialogue with God. “Lord,” he’d pray. “I’m bone weary. Remind me again that this is something you want me to do. ‘Cause I tell you the truth, if it’s just my wanting it, I’m about ready to quit.”

In answer, Eugene says he believes that God sent Jeffrey back to him. Jeffrey had graduated the school the year before; now he came to visit and found Eugene about to replace a fluorescent bulb in a hallway. “Jeffrey, I’m so glad to see you,” Eugene said while giving him a big bear hug. “How’re you doing, Son?”

“Fine, Sir,” he responded, his good manners impressing Eugene beyond measure. “Mr. Edwards,” he went on. “I want to thank you for the time you

spent with me here, caring about me. I never would have made it through sixth grade if it had not been for you.”

“Jeffrey, I am so proud of you,” Eugene responded. “And you’re going to finish high school, aren’t you.”

“Yes, Sir,” he said, his face breaking into a huge smile. “I’m even going to college, Mr. Edwards! Like you!”

Eugene almost cried. He determined to stick it out with his studies. Jeffrey was counting on him.

Finally the morning of May 3, 1997 arrived - graduation day.

At Gainesville’s Georgia Mountain Center, Eugene is almost overcome with emotion. Standing outside in his black robe, mortarboard with tassel atop his head, he glances at the blue-stoned college class ring on his 55-year old plumber’s work-worn hand. Tears threaten to run down his cheeks.

As the music swells, the processional begins with Brenau University's president and faculty in full academic regalia looking impressive indeed, along with trustees and a guest speaker, the Honorable Edward Elson, US Ambassador to the kingdom of Denmark.

All those dignitaries remain standing to honor the graduates - 350 weekend and evening college undergraduates, candidates for degrees. When Eugene hears his name echoing throughout the huge hall - Eugene Edwards - somehow he gets on stage, never feeling his feet touch the floor.

He floats back to his seat, beaming like a lit-up Christmas tree, clutching the tangible evidence of a long-cherished dream come true: a square of parchment with those all-important words, "Bachelor of Science Degree in Middle Grades Education."

"Yessiree," his inner self is thinking, "just goes to show you. If you dream long enough - and work hard enough - the good Lord will help make your dream come true."

A teacher at last.

Mr. Roy, he thinks to himself, would be proud.

It wasn't easy, but by listening to what God was calling him to do, Eugene found the deep happiness and satisfaction that comes from doing God's will, which always entails going the extra mile. Like Mr. Roy told him, God tells us, if you want something, go out and get it - and be the best you can be. Well all of want true happiness, but much like with Eugene's journey, doing it requires work.

Jesus this week gives us the blueprint for how that's done. The Beatitudes. We've often heard them, but every time I hear them I know for me I find myself wondering about them just a little bit, because they can be a little philosophical or hard to understand. But really, what each one comes down to is fine tuning our faith so we, like Eugene, go that extra mile. So let's break them down briefly.

Blessed are the poor in spirit, for theirs is the kingdom of heaven. What this gets at is pride; pride that says I matter most, it's about me, my ego. Think though of Eugene letting go and letting God; saying "OK God, what do you

want me to do here with my life.” The paradox is the more we give our lives away, the happier we become; for Eugene, there was a whole lot more work and less pay at age 50 than he could have had, but he found true joy as he said barely keeping his feet on the ground as he walked across that stage on the day of his graduation as he pursued his vocation.

Blessed are they who mourn, for they will be comforted. Pretty odd at first - is it a good thing to be sad? Jesus isn't saying we have to be the Care Bear here with the rain cloud. Rather the meaning here is when we are sorrowful for our sins. Think of Jeffrey outside of the classroom getting the pep talk from Eugene, but then owning up to his mistakes and making changes. Or Eugene telling him hey, Jeffrey, I love you but you have to follow rules and shape up. Culture might say do what you want, but we should have a sorrow over our sins; a sense of wanting to repent, of looking at our lives and saying what's going right and wrong, and saying Lord I am sorry for this and sin causes me sorrow, but I want to do better.

Blessed are the meek or lowly for they will inherit the land. The meaning here is those who empty themselves or forget about themselves are the most grounded or closest to reality; they aren't preoccupied with ego or

power, but lose themselves in whatever they do. They are humble. Eugene was immersed in helping the kids at the school and his hard work and then his studies; nothing he did was about him, but rather about helping others.

Blessed are they who hunger and thirst for righteousness, for they will be satisfied. We humans hunger for lots of things; money, power; material stuff. Nothing wrong with having stuff of even power, but none of these things will fully satisfy. The one thing that will satisfy us though is friendship with God. How happy we are when we want to grow closer to God above all things through prayer and introspection, listening to God and doing his will.

Blessed are the merciful, for they will be shown mercy. Remember to love others is to will their good; mercy means forgiveness, but it also means showing empathy. It means suffering with others; it means helping them. We pray this beatitude and say Lord help my eyes to be open, much like Eugene's were when he saw kids in need, and saw the suffering they were going through from tough situations and realized he could do something about it. We live this out through how sacrifices of love for one another.

Blessed are the clean of heart, for they will see God. If you want to be a saint, your life is centered around one thing - God. God is your anchor. How easy it is to be torn by different drives and wishes; sometimes as we know there's sinful tendencies we have. We look at them and with God work to overcome temptation. Or we are divided into pursuing other wishes that maybe aren't sinful, but deep down we know we are called to something greater. Or we love God but become just too busy to be with God because we are focused on this and that. When God is our center though, we make better choices and find true happiness.

Blessed are the peacemakers, they shall be called children of God. How much peace do we make during the day? For Eugene is was talking to students and trying to help them. Maybe we forgive someone who needs forgiving. Maybe we show patience on the road or with people in our lives. Maybe we refrain from gossip or tearing someone down with words or by clicking "send." Maybe we turn the other cheek. Peace isn't just avoiding being cruel; it's doing something to help bring about peace.

And last, blessed are those who are persecuted for the sake of righteousness. Doing the right thing isn't easy; as I said last week, be it talking about the faith or a concern with a loved one, or speaking up about

faith and morals in a world that seems to move further away from God and become increasingly secular and “do whatever you want,” we will be hated at times for the Gospel. But as Bishop Robert Barron puts it, if you are never criticized you aren’t in a good spiritual space. False prophets in the Bible are loved by leaders because everyone loves a “yes man” or the message that “you are great.” Well, we are great - loved by God - but we are also sinners and flawed. Eugene could have let the student walked around with his pants on the ground, looking like a fool to echo the song, but he talked to them and said this isn’t right. So who does God want us to challenge? How does God want us to catechize and help others learn what the faith is truly about?

I obviously do not know Eugene. But I know many people like him; I’ve had great teachers and family in my life, and every day I see the kinds of things in his story demonstrated here at Saint Joe’s. I think of our hard working teachers like Mr. Hale, who’s been here since the 80s, driving in every day to live out his vocation; I think of our principal Mrs. Roche and all she does to help make our school such a special place. Indeed in visiting our classrooms and seeing first hand the amazing things that have happened since I started here as pastor 8 years ago, I see many Eugenes who work

and volunteer here at our school and church, people who have carefully considered their calling and realized God put them here for a reason. So how about us? We can coast through life, or like Eugene, we can carefully listen to what God calls us to do and get to work. It won't be easy, but it will allow us to be transformed by God so we can transform life on earth rather than just settle for a life with less commitment and superficial happiness, instead obtaining true joy and happiness and helping others to do the same.