

THE JOY OF CONTENTMENT NOVEMBER 22 2009  
ST. LUKE'S UNITED METHODIST CHURCH  
M. KENT MILLARD

During November we have had a four sermon series on finding joy in life. The first sermon was on discovering the joy of LIVING SIMPLY SO OTHERS MIGHT SIMPLY LIVE. The second message was on finding joy by LIVING WITH AN ATTITUDE OF GRATITUDE. Last Sunday we talked about DISCOVERING THE JOY OF GIVING GENEROUSLY. Today we will think about the joy of BEING CONTENT WITH WHAT WE HAVE.

We have been giving out apples each Sunday to remind us that in Psalm 17 God says that we are the "apple of God's eye." If you have ever wondered where that phrase "the apple of God's eye" comes from, look at Psalm 17:8.

Today we will be giving out bright red apples to remind us that we are the apple of God's eye so we should be content with the gifts God has already given us.

Giving out these apples, reminds me of a story about some children going through the lunch line in a Catholic school. There was a table in the middle of the room with the food on it and children were going down both sides filling their plates.

There was bowl of juicy red apples at the beginning of the line and one of the sisters had put a sign beside it which read: TAKE ONLY ONE, GOD IS WATCHING.

At the end of the food line there was a plate of homemade chocolate chip cookies and a little boy had scrawled a sign there which read: TAKE ALL YOU WANT; GOD IS WATCHING THE APPLES.

Today we invite you to take only one bright red apple per person but you can go down to the Great Hall and eat all you want at the complementary Consecration Sunday brunch.

Here is the background for the scripture lesson for today. St. Paul was imprisoned in Rome because of his faith and a friend named EPAPHRODITUS from Philippi in Greece came to bring him a gift and words of encouragement. Paul is grateful for the gift and the concern from his friends in Philippi so he wrote a letter that Epaphroditus took back and read to the people of Philippi. That letter was later put in the New Testament and has been a source of encouragement to Christians ever since.

Today we are blessed to have a young person read a portion of this letter to us.

8:15: LIAM HOBSON: Would you tell us the names of your parents and any brothers or sisters you have. Where do you go to school and what grade are you in?

9:30 am: BRYN WALKER

11:00 am: XAVIER LEWIS

The verse I want to focus on today is: I HAVE LEARNED TO BE CONTENT WITH WHATEVER I HAVE. This is our memory verse for today: Would you say it with me: I HAVE LEARNED TO BE CONTENT WITH WHATEVER I HAVE.

Let us pray.

Last week I spoke about generosity and how a member of our congregation generously gave us \$7,000 to give out here at St. Luke's, at our Later service on Sunday evening, and at our satellite services at Beef and Boards and at Oak Hill Mansion. He also gave an additional gift for us to give out to organizations which meet the needs of the poor during the Christmas season.

Last Sunday we gave 350 people an envelope with a \$20 bill in it, asked them to put their own \$20 bill or more in the envelope and then give it to someone in need.

Last Wednesday, a woman came up to me and told me about her experience in giving this gift away. She took one of the envelopes and added a generous gift of her own. Then she decided that she would give this envelope with the money in it to her sister who had lost her job and was facing some other challenges as well.

She explained to her sister how she received this generous gift in worship last Sunday and added her own gift to it and then gave it to her sister. Her sister was deeply touched by the gift and the thoughtfulness behind it.

However, her sister thought for a moment and then said that she knew someone else who needed this gift even more than she did so she added her own gift to the envelope and took it to another friend in need.

When the sister gave this gift to her friend, the friend was deeply touched by the gift and the thoughtfulness behind it. However, she said that she knew another person who needed it even more than she did so she added her gift to the envelope and took it to her friend.

Now, we don't know the end of this story yet. We don't know how many people will receive this gift and then add their own gift to it and give the envelope full of cash to someone else in need. The person who gave this gift in the first place wanted to stimulate our own generosity and that goal has been reached in this case in a wonderful way.

This gift has enabled many people to experience the joy of giving generously and caring for someone else in need.

Isn't this amazing! Each person who received the gift must have thought: "Things may not be so great in my life but I'm basically contented and really okay in my situation but I know someone else who might need it more than I do so I will give it to them." Think of the joy they felt in being able to give this gift to someone else.

This morning I want us to think about the joy of contentment, the joy that comes when we are content or satisfied with what we already have so we can give generously to others who may have greater needs.

When St. Paul wrote his letter to the Philippians he was in a situation in which he could have felt miserable and discontented. When Paul wrote this letter to his friends in Philippi he was imprisoned in Rome, because he refused to bow down and worship the Roman Emperor as a god.

Roman prisons were notoriously bad places to be and if someone didn't have people on the outside bringing them food, they might well starve to death. Evidently there were Christian friends in Rome who brought Paul food and hope during the two or three years he waited in prison for his trial and ultimate execution.

Several years earlier Paul had started the church in the Greek city of Philippi and he loved them and they loved him. The Philippians sent one of their trusted leaders named Epaphroditus to Rome to visit Paul in prison and to bring him gifts of food and money with which he could buy food after Epaphroditus had left.

Paul was so impressed with the love and concern of the Philippians that he wrote this letter for Epaphroditus to take back to Philippi and to read to the people. It is a brief letter in which Paul tells his friends how much he loves them and encourages them to always rejoice and thank God in the midst all circumstances.

He concludes his letter with these words:

I REJOICE IN THE LORD GREATLY...FOR I HAVE LEARNED TO BE CONTENT WITH WHATEVER I HAVE.  
I KNOW WHAT IT IS TO HAVE LITTLE, AND I KNOW WHAT IT IS TO HAVE PLENTY.  
I KNOW WHAT IT IS LIKE TO BE HUNGRY AND I KNOW WHAT IT IS LIKE TO BE WELL FED.  
I CAN DO ALL THINGS THROUGH HIM WHO STRENGTHENS ME.  
FOR I HAVE LEARNED TO BE CONTENT WITH WHATEVER I HAVE.

I find it amazing that Paul writes about rejoicing in God and living with contentment when he is confined to a Roman prison cell. You would think this would be a time of great discontent in his life when he would complain about the unfairness of life and about the miserable conditions in which he lived. But in Paul's letter from prison, you find no words of complaint but only words of praise to God and expressions of joy for God's living presence in his life.

You see, Paul's contentment did not depend on his outward circumstances whether he had little in the way of material things or abundance in the way of material things; whether he was hungry or full; whether he was imprisoned or free.

Paul's contentment came because he knew he was the apple of God's eye, he knew he was loved and cherished by God, he knew the living presence of Christ in his life, and nothing that human beings could do would separate him from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord.

In the midst of what we would call great suffering in prison, Paul writes these incredible words: I HAVE LEARNED TO BE CONTENT WITH WHATEVER I HAVE.

This morning I would encourage all of us to take Paul's words to heart. Instead of complaining about what we don't have or thinking that if we get more material things we will be happy, we should follow Paul's example and say: I HAVE LEARNED TO BE CONTENT WITH WHATEVER I HAVE.

If we are content with what we have, we won't be unhappy about what we don't have.

I am always amazed to discover people who have great hardships in their lives and yet live with joy and contentment.

About 15 years ago a friend of mine was studying to be a pastor at the Iliff School of Theology in Denver. He was a ruggedly handsome man with a brilliant mind, deep faith in God and a passion to share God's love for all people. Darryl loved to ride his bicycle for exercise and he kept himself in good shape.

Darryl went for an early morning ride along one of the bicycle paths in Denver and as he came around a curve he ran into another early morning bicyclist. They crashed head on into each other and Darryl's head went into the chest of the other cyclist and Darryl's back was broken. Now Darryl is paralyzed from his chest down and lives in his wheelchair.

Darryl completed seminary, taught in Seminary for awhile, married the love of his life who is also a pastor and he has devoted himself to bringing people together across all the divisions in our society and working for justice and fairness for all people throughout the Midwest. He now lives in Ohio where his wife serves as the pastor of a congregation near Dayton.

Now, you might think that someone who has gone through such pain, suffering and disappointment in his life would be unhappy, discontented, or bitter.

However, Darryl is not any of those things. Darryl came to see me last week to talk about how we might bring people together from all parts of our society and work together to make a better world for all people. Darryl is the kind of person that everyone enjoys visiting with. He laughs easily, he is deeply interested in your life and what you are doing and the challenges you might be facing in your own journey.

When he looks you in the eyes he is fully present and attentive to whatever you might be saying. He is the kind of person with such a hopeful and joyful attitude towards life that you don't want the conversation to end.

I asked him last week how he was doing and he told me honestly that there have been discouraging moments in his life, but he is counting his blessings. He is glad to be alive, to be married to the love of his life, to have the education and abilities he has and the opportunity to serve God and others so that he feels blessed.

Darryl seems to be a living example of what Paul wrote about 2,000 years ago: I HAVE LEARNED TO BE CONTENT WITH WHATEVER I HAVE even if it means that I am paralyzed and live the rest of my life in a wheelchair.

You see, Darryl and Paul's contentment comes not from their exterior circumstances but from their interior experience of knowing God is with them and, with God in your heart, you can be content in all circumstances of life.

Possessions may come and go; income may come and go as it has for many people in our society but contentment and deep joy in life is an interior quality of experiencing the love and grace of God so strongly that our contentment does not come and go according to the outward circumstances of our lives.

My prayer is that all of us could come to say with Paul: I Have learned to be content with whatever I have.

My image is that contentment is like a baby being held in the arms of a loving parent. When one of the babies we baptized this morning is sleeping in the arms of a loving mother or father, that baby is content. There may be great turmoil in the world, There may be conflicts raging all around them but that baby is content because they are held in the arms of a loving parent.

In a similar way, when we know we are held in the loving arms of our compassionate God, we can be content in spite of the losses or turmoil that may be going on around us.

Because Paul knew he was held in the loving arms of God, he could say in prison: I HAVE LEARNED TO BE CONTENT WITH WHATEVER I HAVE.

This Thursday we will celebrate THANKSGIVING DAY. The first Thanksgiving Day celebration took place in 1621 in the Massachusetts Bay colony when Pilgrims and Indians came together for a fall feast.

About 120 Pilgrims arrived on the Mayflower in 1620 to settle in this new land in search of religious freedom. Their first winter in Massachusetts was disastrous. It was an unusually cold and snowy winter and the Pilgrims ran out of food. Starvation and disease was rampant in the colony and half of the people who had arrived from England the year before died. Every family lost a husband, wife, parent or child during that hard winter to disease or starvation.

The Indians who watched these strangers arrive with fear and trepidation began to have compassion and sympathy for them as they watched them bury their loved ones in the cold hard earth.

In the spring Indians came and taught the Pilgrims to plant corn, barley, beans and pumpkins and how to hunt and fish in this new world.

Consequently, in the fall after the harvest, the Pilgrims invited the Indians to a feast to give thanks to God that some of them were still alive and to thank their Indian friends for helping them to survive. Tradition says that the Pilgrims brought their harvest of corn, barley, beans and pumpkins and the Indians brought deer and wild turkeys for the feast.

The Pilgrims gathered to give thanks not because life had been easy for them that past year. They had all lost loved ones during that first year in this new land. They could have chosen to be filled with bitterness and anger for all that they had lost. But in spite of their losses and hardship, they choose to give thanks to God and to be content in their situation, difficult as it had been.

They had learned with Paul that in spite of the difficulties they faced, they had learned to be content with whatever they had and to give thanks in the midst of all the circumstances of life.

You see, it was a choice they made. They could have counted all their sorrows and losses and spent the fall complaining to God for the unfairness of life.

But they were followers of Jesus Christ and they made a different decision. Instead of counting their woes, they counted their blessings and started the tradition of Thanksgiving in this country. They choose contentment and gratitude over discontentment and bitterness.

All of us face the same choice all the time. We can count our woes and wind up being discontented and bitter about life. Or we can count our blessings and wind up being thankful and contented with life.

This Thanksgiving, I invite you to count your blessings; to focus on all the ways that God has blessed your life and to be content with what you have. Say with Paul: I HAVE LEARNED TO BE CONTENT WITH WHATEVER I HAVE.

In his book entitled *ENOUGH* Adam Hamilton asks us which TENT we will choose to live in: con-TENT-ment or discon-TENT-ment? Each one of us decides which TENT we will live in. Will we live in the tent of discontent or the tent of contentment?

There are many people in our world who seem to live in a perpetual state of discontent and unhappiness. They always seem to look on the dark side of every situation.

Recently, I heard a recording of a counselor who told about a woman client of his. She continually complained about her husband; she didn't like his manners at the table, she didn't like the way he ate his food, she didn't like the way he dressed, she didn't like the way he hung up his clothes, she didn't like the way he spoke. Her whole counseling session was taken up with the things about her husband that she didn't like.

Finally, the counselor told her she probably had two choices: if she was so discontent with her husband she could choose to leave him or she could choose to accept him as he was and choose to give up all of her complaints about him.

The woman thought for a moment and then said: "But if I don't have him to complain about, what would be the purpose of my life?"

Some people have been so discontent for so long, they think that is the only way to live.

However, there is another approach. We can choose to be content with whatever we have.

Benjamin Franklin once put it this way: CONTENTMENT MAKES POOR MEN RICH, AND DISCONTENTMENT MAKES RICH MEN POOR.

Ethel Booth, a long time member of our congregation, gave me a book mark with this statement on it: CONTENTMENT DOES NOT COME FROM THE FULFILLMENT OF YOUR DESIRES, CONTENTMENT COMES FROM THE RECOGNITION OF ALL YOUR BLESSINGS.

Recently someone sent me this story.

A woman was waiting to board a plane in the airport waiting area.

She watched as an elderly man escorted his daughter to the plane. They kissed and hugged and then the father said to his daughter: I LOVE YOU AND I WISH YOU ENOUGH.

His daughter cried and said to her dad: I LOVE YOU TOO AND I WISH YOU ENOUGH. They hugged and cried and the daughter got in line to board the plane.

The woman watched the elderly man as he stood by the window watching the plane taxi down the runway and take off into the sky with tears in his eyes.

Finally, she went over to him and asked if it was his daughter that he put on the plane. He said she was his daughter and it is hard to say goodbye forever.

He went on to explain that he had a terminal illness and the next time she came back it would probably be for his funeral.

The woman was sympathetic to his pain and then said: "When you were saying goodbye, I heard you both say 'I wish you enough.' What does that mean?"

The old man sat down and smiled. "That is a wish that has been handed down from generation to generation in my family," he said. "When we say I wish you enough it means that we want the other person to have enough joys and enough challenges to give them a meaningful life."

Then he recited from memory this poem:

I WISH YOU ENOUGH SUN TO KEEP YOUR ATTITUDE BRIGHT NO MATTER HOW DARK THE DAY MAY BE.  
I WISH YOU ENOUGH RAIN TO MAKE YOU APPRECIATE THE SUN.  
I WISH YOU ENOUGH PAIN SO THAT EVEN THE SMALLEST JOYS WILL BE APPRECIATED.  
I WISH YOU ENOUGH LOSS SO THAT YOU WILL APPRECIATE ALL THE BLESSINGS YOUR LIFE  
I WISH YOU ENOUGH HELLOS TO GET YOU THROUGH THE FINAL GOOD BYE.

The older man began to cry and walk away.

My prayer is that all of us would have enough. Enough joys and enough challenges in our lives to make life meaningful and rich and help us to be thankful to God in all circumstances.

My prayer is that all of us would come to the place in our lives where we can say with the Apostle Paul:

I have learned to be content with whatever I have. When we learn the secret of contentment in our lives we will discover the deepest joy that God can give. There is joy in contentment; in accepting both the joys and heartaches of life.

Our closing hymn reminds us to rejoice in God in both the good times and the hard times of life. The third verse has these words:

YES, ON THROUGH LIFE'S LONG PATH, STILL CHANTING AS WE GO;  
FROM YOUTH TO AGE BY NIGHT AND DAY, IN GLADNESS AND IN WOE:  
REJOICE, REJOICE, REJOICE GIVE THANKS AND SING.

Paul said: I REJOICE IN THE LORD GREATLY...FOR I HAVE LEARNED TO BE CONTENT WITH WHATEVER I HAVE.

Let us pray.