

The Joy of Contentment

Sixteenth Sunday after Pentecost – September 28, 2003

Sermon Background Study

Scripture Passages

Psalm 23 (NRSV)

¹The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want.

²He makes me lie down in green pastures;
he leads me beside still waters;

³he restores my soul.

He leads me in right paths
for his name's sake.

⁴Even though I walk through the darkest valley,
I fear no evil;

for you are with me;
your rod and your staff –
they comfort me.

⁵You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.

⁶Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the LORD
my whole life long.

Philippians 4:10-14 (NRSV)

¹⁰I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. ¹²I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. ¹³I can do all things through him who strengthens me. ¹⁴In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress.

*Today, we continue the four-week series: Finding Joy.
This week, we reflect upon contentment and its place in
building a joyful life.*

Contentment??

When my wife, Patti, and I were dating, I once turned to her and told her that I felt “content” when I was with her. She looked at me with a wondering expression, not quite sure what to make of my “contentment.” After all, don’t we sometimes speak of people being content with mediocrity, as if they’ve settled for less than they should have? Obviously, I quickly explained myself! In my mind, I had paid Patti the highest compliment. By content, I meant that I was at peace, free from anxiety – and what a joyful state that is!

Anxiety has always been part of the human condition. In Paul’s day, people were no less anxious and stressed out than we are now. For the ancients, heaven was populated with countless gods and goddesses, any of whom might take a disliking toward you or your neighbors on a whim. The pantheon of the gods was like one big soap opera, far removed from any human control. The gods would do what they wanted, when they wanted. People coped with the whims of the gods in different ways. Some, like the Epicureans, decided that since they

Self-sufficiency

I was taught to be self-reliant, always ready to “pull myself up by the bootstraps.” Many of us are. Understood correctly, self-reliance is a good thing. Paul supported himself with his skills as a tent-maker rather than relying on others for financial support. He was committed to his ministry and knew that he couldn’t stand by and leave it up to others.

But as we are inclined to do in all things, too often we turn a healthy self-reliance into an unhealthy self-sufficiency. We forget that we actually need others. We forget that just as God is inherently relational, so are we. We are not independent of others, we are dependent upon them to help us realize our purpose and to teach us about love. God does not call us to some sort of self-sufficient isolation, but to community and fellowship.

Indeed, much of the biblical story is devoted to shaking us out of our misguided self-sufficiency and self-centeredness. The long story of God and his people makes us realize that we are dependent upon God, that it is he who strengthens us and enables us to accomplish all that we do.

couldn't control their capricious gods, they'd simply grab all the pleasure and happiness they could in life.¹ (Sounds like a lot of people I know!) Others, like the Stoics, sought to make themselves immune to anxiety by learning a detached self-sufficiency, which they called "contentment."² In today's passage from his letter to the Christians in Philippi, Paul uses the language of the Stoics. This is the only place in his letters that Paul refers to himself as "content" (*autarkes* in the Greek). Paul would often use the language and vocabulary of his audience when he spoke to them about Jesus Christ.³ But Paul always meant something different too; there was always a Christian perspective. For the Stoics, contentment was all about being independent, needing no one else. That way, the "content" person couldn't be harmed by the emotions or slights or needs of others. Obviously, Paul means something quite different.

The Good Shepherd

When I was in college, I worked a couple of summers in the Wyoming range collecting samples of underground water. There were *lots* of sheep – and they always struck me as a pretty content group. I even met a few Basque shepherds who lived in small horse-drawn wagons as they tended to their flocks – as they cared for the sheep and lambs. They ensured that their flocks lacked nothing – which is what the psalmist means in v.1 of Psalm 23.

The imagery of God as the good shepherd and we as his flock is one of the dominant portraits of God in the Bible. It is not a very complicated or intellectual portrait. God cares – that's it. He cares for his flock and for each sheep in it. Even in a flock of a hundred sheep, the good shepherd will search high and low for the one who is lost (Matt 18:10-14). God finds for us the green pastures and the still waters. This seems to be a lot harder for us to learn than it is for the sheep. But it is God who strengthens us as we seek to shed our anxieties and find the joy that can be ours.

"The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want"

In v. 10 of today's passage, evidently Paul has received some sort of financial help from the Philippians and he thanks them for it. Perhaps he needed some help with expenses while in prison or perhaps it is financial support that he can use in his work. In any event, as joyful as he is to get the gift, Paul wants the Philippians to understand that his life is no longer driven by whether he happens to have a little at the moment or a lot. Such peace in all circumstances doesn't come naturally. Paul has had to *learn* to be satisfied in whatever circumstances or surroundings he finds himself. Remember, this is Paul's letter of joy – and he is writing from prison! He learned well.

How has Paul learned this? What is his "secret"? Paul has learned that he can do all things – such as being content in all circumstances – through God. It is God who gives Paul the strength that he needs to be free from worry and anxiety. Paul's secret is that he has come to understand and truly embrace the psalmist's portrait of God as the good shepherd. Though Paul languishes in prison, he will "fear no evil," confident that God will lead him to green pastures and still water. Paul's cup will always overflow – in all circumstances. He knows that he will dwell in God's house forever, because nothing – "not death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers . . . nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus" (Romans 8:38-39). Such confidence in God and the strength he provides is the basis for Paul's joyful contentment – and our own.

¹Epicurus taught that since we have no life other than this one, the good life is the life bringing the most pleasure and happiness now. It is unfortunate that "Epicureanism" has come to be associated with a profligate and luxurious lifestyle. This is not what Epicurus had in mind. He led a simple, honest life, believing that justice, honesty, and simplicity were the truest paths to a happy and pleasurable life.

²Stoicism has been popularized recently in Tom Wolfe's novel, *A Man in Full*. In the novel, Charlie Croker, a rough and tumble Atlanta real estate developer, finds salvation in the second-century writings of Epictetus, a Stoic philosopher. For Stoics, humans become virtuous through knowledge, enabling us to live in harmony with nature and achieve a profound sense of happiness, freedom from emotion, and detachment from the turmoil of life – to be content and self-sufficient in all things.

³For example, Acts 17 tells the story of Paul's appearance before a council of Greek philosophers in Athens. There, Paul talks to them in their language, speaking to their issues. For example, the Greeks had always questioned the nature of "being." Paul told them that it is in the Lord God that we live, move, and "have our being." He talks to them about Jesus, but in their own words and idea. Paul knew that all truth is God's truth; that, in God, the Greeks could find the answers they had long sought.

Daily Bible Readings

Before reading each passage, take a few minutes to get a sense of the context. Your study bible should help. Jot down a few questions that come to mind from your reading of the passage.

<p>Day 1 1 Timothy 6:2b-21 Notice how Paul puts contentment and godliness together in v. 6</p>	<p>Day 2 Hebrews 13:1-17 In these exhortations to mutual love, the writer points us toward contentment (v.5)</p>
<p>Day 3 John 10:1-18 Jesus is the good shepherd who will give his life for his flock.</p>	<p>Day 4 Matthew 6:25-34 Jesus teaches his disciples that they are simply not to worry ~ not about money or clothing or even what lies in store tomorrow!</p>
<p>Day 5 Luke 10:38-42 Seeing that Martha is distracted and worried about all that she must get done, Jesus reminds her that, in truth, only one thing matters. What do you think he is referring to?</p>	<p>Weekly Prayer Concerns</p>

Sermon Notes

Scott Engle's 9:30 class, Something More, now meeting in Wesley Hall (the "old sanctuary")!!

This new class, *Something More*, is open to all adults. It is a great chance to make new friends. More than 130 people have joined the class! The class is based on the Sunday morning sermon series and background studies. It is a lecture-oriented class, but there is always plenty of time for questions, answers, and fellowship.

Please join us next week!

Questions for Discussion and Reflection

1. Here is the bottom line - why is it so hard for us to shed worry and anxiety!!!!? What makes us cling to our worries if they are precious possessions? Make a list of reasons! What can we do to learn (truly learn and apply!) what Paul learned about relying upon God's strength and care? How can we help each other in this? How do we truly become content and joyful in all circumstances, knowing that God's riches are all we really need? Do we even really believe that God's riches are all we need? This is the time for honesty!
2. In her commentary on Philippians, Morna Hooker wonders whether it is the money for which Paul is grateful or simply that the Philippians sent him a gift of any kind. Often, it can be the smallest of gestures that mean a lot to us. A phone call, an e-mail, a brief note, perhaps just a kind word or two. I can't tell you how much it means to me whenever I get an encouraging word or note from a member of our congregation. I know that it takes time - and there is little that we value more in our busy lives. Dr. Hooker asks us, "Do we always remember to show appreciation for what others do for us in simple ways? Do we remember to help those who, like Paul, are going through a rough patch and need our prayers and concerns?"