

First Presbyterian Church
Cheyenne, Wyoming
October 16, 2011
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Worship Theme: *Cultivating Contentment*
Ecclesiastes 2:10-11; Hebrews 13:5-6; Luke 12:13-21

The writers of the New Testament understood the seat of emotions, contentment and compassion to be the *splanchnon*, the Greek word for bowels and intestines, which roughly corresponds to “guts”. In 1 John 3:17 of the King James Translation we read “If anyone hath this world’s goods and sees his brother in need but does not open up his *bowels of compassion* for him, how can the love of God be in him?”

Well, as you might imagine, most preachers ponder the indigestible possibilities that arise from this translation for less than a minute before concluding, “Let’s not go there.” In fact, newer versions of the bible translate this verse: “If anyone has material possessions and sees his brother in need but has no pity on him, how can the love of God be in him?” *Bowels of compassion* are no where to be found.

Beyond the odd imagery that this may conjure up in our minds, the idea of being content and sharing what we have may be the most difficult struggle we face in our lives as we try to be Christ like servants. For it is in this attribute that we **strive to receive Christ as our path to real contentment in life**. Perhaps, the reason that we find this so difficult is that in American culture, money is the idol that steals our hearts from God. Making money is the idolatrous alternative to living as servants. For many, money is the path to contentment in life.

How many of us have not dreamed of winning the lottery? What would you do if you did? After we quit our jobs, most of us have a laundry list of “things” that we desire and that we would purchase. We tend to measure our personal progress by our ability to buy *things* that we do not need. Many of us have succumbed to the myth that money can actually deliver the things it promises—happiness, security, relationships, and confidence.

Consider the experience of Stumpy and Martha. Each year Stumpy and Martha attended their state’s fair, and every summer it was the same story. Stumpy was tantalized by the old-fashioned bi-plane in which anybody could take a ride for ten dollars, and Martha was disgusted by such an obvious waste of money. “Ten dollars is ten dollars,” she would always say. And Stumpy would go home without his airplane ride.

One year Stumpy said, “Martha, there’s that bi-plane again. I am eighty-one years old and this year I want to go for a ride.” Martha bristled, “There you go again. Don’t you realize that ten dollars is ten dollars?”

At this point the man who owned the bi-plane, and who had heard this conversation as far back as he could remember, intervened. “Listen you two; I’ll make you a deal. I’ll give you both a ride for free if you promise not to say anything during the flight. If you speak even one word, I’ll charge you the ten dollars.” Stumpy and Martha agreed and off they went.

The pilot put on quite a show. He took his plane through banks and spins and loop-the-loop, and then the whole thing over again. Amazingly, he never heard a single word. When the plane landed he looked over at Stumpy and said, “I’ll have to admit I’m impressed. You never spoke, not even once.”

“Well,” said Stumpy, “I was going to say something when Martha fell out of the plane, but **ten dollars is ten dollars.**”¹

“Friends, if there is one thing we Americans understand, it’s the value of money. If there is one thing that Americans fundamentally misunderstand, it’s the value of God.”² We may trust God to be here with us; we may trust God to hear our prayers; we may even trust God with getting us into heaven. But the toughest

¹ McDonald, Glenn. *The Disciples Making Church*. p. 223.

² Ibid.

challenge for us is trusting that God *provides*—that God will actually come through by supplying us with what we need, when we need it.

The key question to helping us to discern our personal commitment to Christ as his followers and the key question in trusting in God's provision is this: *Who is in Charge?* Who do I think is in charge? Who gets to decide what success looks like? Who determines what constitutes the good life? What does contentment look like?

Paul writes in 1 Timothy 6:17, "Command those who are rich in the present world not to be arrogant nor to put their hope in wealth, which is so uncertain, but to put their hope in God, who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment." In other words, God alone declares the meaning of success and contentment.

From a global perspective, any of us who are able to make a purchase simply from our own desires not from an actual need, we are among "those who are rich in the present world." The evidence of our wealth was obvious as we emptied our closets to provide for Hurricane Katrina evacuees. Truck load, upon truck load was delivered to local disaster relief centers and many times that amount to the other shelters around the country. And I would imagine that most of us could clean out our closets again this afternoon and set aside what we know we will never use again and the result would be an even greater number of donations.

Natural disasters remind us that everything in this world is temporary. We've seen many interviews of survivors who say, "All these things can be replaced. I am just grateful that my family survived." At times like this we can say with Jesus, "My life does not consist in the abundance of possessions."

The Bible assures us that there's nothing inherently wrong with being rich. But it also tells us that being rich is inherently dangerous. We who are used to nice things are powerfully tempted to associate our happiness with our continued accumulation of more nice things. Our choices come down to putting our hope in money, which, as Paul says, "is so uncertain," or putting our hope in God, who "richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment."

Yet, daily we are bombarded with the message from our culture that our lives do consist of our possessions. The consistent message in our culture is "bigger, better, newer, and faster" are the things that we are to strive to possess. While we believe that our "stuff" is not what is important, we live as if it is. We are engaged in a daily struggle.

In his book, *Enough: Discovering Joy through Simplicity and Generosity*, Adam Hamilton describes what he calls the Restless Heart Syndrome. He says, "Its primary symptom is discontent. We find that we are never satisfied with anything—the moment we acquire something, we scarcely take time to enjoy it before we want something else" (p. 55). We are like children on Christmas morning who rip open one gift after another and at the end ask, "What's next?" without ever having enjoyed each gift."

On any given day there are millions of people who would define success as picking the correct numbers in this week's lottery or having a high annual income. Such situations they would claim as a great gain. Yet, Paul provides a different view of success in his letter to Timothy: "godliness with contentment is great gain" he writes.

So, how much net worth does it take for us to experience godliness with contentment? If our check book shows a winning lottery ticket in the deposit column but authentic contentment as a loss, then our net balance would be less than zero. Paul writes, "If we have food and clothing, we will be content with that."

Contentment in the biblical context equals the sum of our basic needs (food, shelter, and clothing) plus an eternal perspective plus whole hearted abandonment to Jesus Christ and his ways. This is the final measure of human success.

Jesus consistently challenges us. He forces us to choose between what we think is treasure and what he thinks is treasure. What hangs in the balance is whether we will experience the reality of trusting God.

Saint Augustine observes that our hearts are restless until they find the rest that is found only in God. Augustine also said that each one of us has an empty place in our hearts that is in the shape of God, and that means that nothing and no one else can entirely or ultimately fill it.

A 20th century theologian, Freidrich Schleiermacher, called this our “God Shaped Void.” This empty space is not a square hole or anything as simple as that, but a complex, hungry, a God-shaped space where only God fits and only God can fill. Try as we might to fill that space with other things - with human relationships, earthly success, possessions- sooner or later they will leave us unsatisfied. What we long for is something else and something more. Clearly, we suffer from Restless Heart Syndrome. We struggle with discontentment. So what can we do?

Paul, writing to the church at Philippi, while waiting in a prison cell in Rome for his sentence, provides an excellent example of contentment, “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. 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” (Phil. 4:11-12).

How might we cultivate such contentment? Adam Hamilton makes four suggestions. First, he says, “Remember it could be worse.” No matter how discontent we may find ourselves with something or someone, remember it could be worse. In other words focus on the good no matter what we might not like about the situation.

Second, ask yourself, “How long will this make me happy?” A recent survey suggests that when I see someone that I feel is of a lesser status than I am with the latest electronic device, such as an I Pad or cell phone, it leads me to have a desire for that new device. I surmise, “I owe it to myself, I am more worthy and therefore should have it.” I become discontent. But if I were to borrow that device, I might soon discover that this is not the path to my happiness.

Third, “Develop a grateful heart...A grateful heart recognizes that all of life is a gift. Contentment comes when we spend more time giving thanks for what we have than thinking about what’s missing or wrong with our lives” (p. 62). Daily, God fills our lives with blessings. We can choose to give thanks for these blessings or to focus our attentions on the disappointments.

Finally, we return to the question, “Where does my soul find true satisfaction? Contrary to what the world would have us believe, we will not find lasting satisfaction or contentment at the shopping mall. We cannot buy it.” The only true satisfaction for us is in our relationships with God and with others. We develop these relationships not by acquiring more and more but by the giving away of ourselves. As Jesus said, “love God with your whole heart, mind and soul and your neighbor as yourself.” This is where we will find contentment.

Every possession, every relationship, and every breath originates from the hand of God. Our security becomes bound up not in trying to “be somebody”, but in recognizing that we already are God’s “somebodies”. As we grasp the truth that our money, our time, our talents, our dreams and everything else we value are not really ours but are gifts from God, we can relax our tight grip on these treasures and let them be multiplied as gifts to others.

Jesus’ heart was consistently aligned to meet the needs of other people. His life from beginning to end was intentionally outward focused: “For even the Son of Man did not come to be served, but to serve, and to give his life as a ransom for many” Mark 10:45 states. Jesus’ identity was that of a servant. Jesus found his true identity in this way and invites us to do the same. When we choose to share and serve as a way of life, we discover contentment and the fullness of our humanity.

What then shall we do? *We will love the Lord our God with all our hearts and souls and minds and our neighbors as ourselves.* That is what we will do, for that is all we can do. How shall we do it? By opening our “bowels of compassion” to share what we have and who we are with those in need. That is the way to cultivate contentment.

“The only real satisfaction of our souls is [God]. We can be content because we know Christ is by our side no matter what we’re walking through. The writer of the Book of Hebrews said it this way: keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for [Christ] has said, ‘I will never leave you or forsake you. So we can say with confidence, ‘The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid’ (13:5-6). With this assurance, we can face whatever each day may bring with contentment and joy.”

God alone is the one who has the power to declare, “This is what’s going to last forever.” For His is the Kingdom and the Power and the Glory forever. Amen.