

First United Methodist Church, Eaton Rapids, Michigan
Sermon for Sunday, 15 November 2009: "Cultivating Contentment"
Part Four of "Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity"
Text: *Philippians 4.11-12 (The Message)* *The Reverend Daniel Hofmann*

I've learned by now to be quite content whatever my circumstances. I'm just as happy with little as with much, with much as with little. I've found the recipe for being happy whether full or hungry, hands full or hands empty. Whatever I have, wherever I am, I can make it through anything in the One who makes me who I am.

WTP? – The sooner we learn that joy and happiness are found in living simple and generous lives, the better we understand what the Apostle Paul meant by "learning to be content in all circumstances."

Introduction

Natural disasters remind us that everything in this world is temporary. If our stuff is taken away by bankruptcy or plundered by thieves or blown away by a tornado or burned in a wildfire, we must remember that material things are only temporary. When I'm gone, most of my stuff will be outdated, worn out, or simply of no value to anyone else—either hocked in a garage sale or thrown in the trash.

So many people often have very little notice of the imminent danger to them personally. Every summer wildfires devastate large areas especially out West. I read about one family that was awakened in the middle of the night by the daughter in time to look out the back window and see the fire leap across the interstate and begin a rapid climb up the hill towards their home. They and thousands of others had ten minutes to grab everything they could take from their homes and flee.

Time magazine's online edition asked the question "What did you save from the fire?" of people who stayed at an emergency shelter.

- Andrew saved his pillow.
- Shervi saved her family pictures and books.
- Angel saved the saxophone she had been leaning to play.
- Karen saved her two cats and important documents.
- Michelle saved her Bible, purse, shoes, diploma, and cell phone.

What would YOU save?

As I watched and read about the lives of people affected by tropical storm Ida this past week, it struck me that this was a moment in which so many people were being forced to think about their relationship to material possessions.

The words of Jesus echoed in my ears every time I saw another picture of people fleeing from their homes: “*One’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions*” (Luke 12.15).

A true statement, wouldn't you say? And yet, everywhere I turn, the world is telling me that it's not true, that life does consist in the abundance of possessions.

While Jesus is telling us that our lives consist of so much more than money or things, our culture is shouting that it's not true.

The result is a wrestling in our hearts.

Last week we talked about the problem that so many are afflicted with *affluenza* and *credit-it is*. This morning I want to talk about a third affliction we must deal with: the Restless Heart Syndrome.

I **Restless Heart Syndrome** – Struggling With Discontent

Perhaps you've heard of restless legs syndrome (RLS), a condition in which one has twitches and contractions in the legs. Restless Heart Syndrome (RHS) works in a similar way, but in the heart—or soul. 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. We are perennially discontent. This is the nature of RHS, and it is a syndrome that, if left unchecked, can destroy us.

Now, there is a certain discontent that God intended us to have. God actually wired our hearts so that they would be discontent with certain things, causing us to seek the only One who can fully satisfy us.

Let me give a couple of examples. There are many people who find themselves discontented with their job. Perhaps we don't like our boss, so we decide the answer is to find something else. Maybe it's not the boss; maybe it's the work environment or the pay. Whatever the reasons we come up with, we are continually searching for the perfect job that will make us “happy.”

Many of us do the same thing when it comes to church. We have this illusion that things are going to be perfect in the church. So, naturally, when we begin to see the “warts” and “blemishes” in our present congregation, we become discontented.

There's that usher who wasn't very friendly to us, and that time when the pastor said something that hurt our feelings, and the incident when no one called after we volunteered for something. Before long, all that we can see is what is wrong with the church. We cannot see the good stuff anymore. So we go church shopping and find another church.

We hang around there for a couple of years until our feelings get hurt or we are disappointed in some way, and then we go looking for "the perfect" church again.

Somehow we believe the grass is always greener on the other side, whether it comes to our homes, our jobs, our church, our parents, our spouses, or whatever.

Sometimes I think God must look down on us and feel the way we feel when we give someone we really care for a special gift and he or she asks for the gift receipt. It's as if we're saying to God, "I don't like what you have given me, God; and I want to trade it in and get something better than what you gave me."

II Four Keys to Cultivating Contentment

The Apostle Paul is an excellent example of contentment. He wrote, "*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*" (Philippians 4.11-12).

When Paul wrote these words, he was sitting in a prison cell in Rome, waiting for the news of whether or not he would be executed.

So what exactly is the "secret" Paul speaks of when he says he has learned the secret to being content in all circumstances?

1. Four Words to Repeat: "It Could Be Worse"

John Ortberg, pastor at Menlo Park Presbyterian Church in California, says there are four words we should say whenever we find ourselves discontented with something or someone: "It could be worse." This is essentially the practice of looking on the bright side or finding the silver lining. It is recognizing that no matter what we may not like about a thing or person or circumstance, we can always find something good to focus on if only we will choose to do so.

2. One Question to Ask: "For How Long Will This Make Me Happy?"

So often we buy something, thinking it will make us happy, only to find that the happiness lasts about as long as it takes to open the box. There is a moment of satisfaction when we make the purchase, but the item does not continue to bring

satisfaction over a period of time. Many of the things we buy are simply not worth the expense. This is why it is a good idea to try before you buy.

3. Develop a Grateful Heart

Gratitude is essential if we are to be content. The Apostle Paul said that we are to “give thanks in all circumstances” (1 Thessalonians 5:18). 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 in our lives.

4. Discover Where Your Soul Finds True Satisfaction

The world answers this question by telling us that we find satisfaction in ease and luxury and comfort and money. The Bible, however, answers the question very differently. From Genesis to Revelation, it tells us that we find our satisfaction in God alone.

Jesus said the two most important things we must do are to “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,” and to “love your neighbor as yourself” (Matthew 22:37, 39). If we keep our focus on these two things, we will find satisfaction for our souls and lasting contentment.

III Five Steps for Simplifying Our Lives

In addition to cultivating contentment in our lives, we need to cultivate simplicity. Contentment and simplicity go hand in hand.

1. Set a Goal of Reducing Your Consumption, and Live Below Your Means

Set a tangible goal to reduce your own personal consumption and the production of waste in your life. For example, use canvas bags when you go grocery shopping and refuse any extra packaging. Whenever you are making purchases, look at the mid-grade instead of the top-of-the-line product. When buying a new car, aim to improve fuel economy over your existing car by at least 10 percent. Eat out less, and when you do eat out, split a meal with your spouse or your friend.

2. Before Making a Purchase, Ask Yourself, *Do I Really Need This? and, Why Do I Want This?*

These questions will help you to determine the true motivation of your desired purchase. Is it a need, a self-esteem issue, or something else? You may find yourself wrestling with your true motive and decide that your reason for purchasing the item is not a good one.

3. Use Something Up Before Buying Something New

Take good care of the things you buy and use them until they are empty, broken, or worn out. Buy things that are made to last; and, when buying things that have a short lifespan, spend your money wisely.

4. Plan Low-cost Entertainment That Enriches

When it comes to choosing entertainment for your family or friends, plan things that are simple and inexpensive. You'll be amazed at how much more pleasure you derive from low-cost, simple activities.

5. Ask Yourself, Are There Major Changes That Would Allow Me to Simplify My Life?

Consider selling a car and buying one you pay for in full, downsizing your home, or getting rid of a club membership you don't use. Ask yourself questions related to your home, possessions, job, and activities to identify some significant changes that will simplify your life. Remember, if you cannot do all the things God is calling you to do and you're unable to find joy in your life, perhaps it's time to simplify in some major ways.

IV The Power of Self-Control

Simplifying your life requires the practice of self-control. Solomon wrote, *"Like a city whose walls are broken down is a person who lacks self-control"* (Proverbs 25:28, NIV).

When a city's walls are broken through, the enemy can march right in and destroy it. There is no longer any protection. Likewise, self-control is a wall around your heart and life that protects you from yourself, from temptation, and from sins that are deadly and ultimately can destroy you. Self-control comes down to making a choice between satisfying an impulse to gain instant gratification and choosing not to act upon the opportunity for instant gratification for some higher cause or greater gratification later. Self-control is about forgoing instant gratification by stopping to think about the answers to three questions:

"What are the long-term consequences of this action?"

"Is there a higher good or a better outcome if I used this resource of time, money, or energy in another way?"

"Will this action honor God?"

V Conclusion

Will you live in discontentment or in contentment? You and you alone determine that. You choose it in large part by deciding what life is about. If you decide that "life does not consist in the abundance of your possessions," then you are choosing contentment. Choosing contentment means we look to God as our Source, giving thanks for what we have; we ask God to give us the right perspective on money and possessions and to change our hearts each day; we decide to live simpler lives, wasting less and conserving more; and we choose to give more generously.

Let us pray:

Lord,

We pray that you might cure us of Restless Heart Syndrome.

We are truly sorry for the times that we received the gifts that you give to us and asked for the gift receipt, unsatisfied with the person you entrusted to our care, unsatisfied with our children or our parents, unsatisfied with our home and our car, our healthcare and our jobs.

Forgive us for the times we've offended you by our discontent.

Forgive us for being content with the things we were not supposed to be content with.

Help us have a hunger and a deep longing to pursue righteousness and holiness and justice and love, to long for you and for your will for our lives.

Help us in this.

Help us to simplify, to get off the treadmill, the hamster wheel, and to find in you our peace.

We ask these mercies in your holy name. **Amen.**