



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
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THE NINTH SUNDAY AFTER PENTECOST

Ordinary Lessons During Extraordinary Times: Contentment Matthew 14:13-21; Philippians 4:1-14

"It's all Covid-19's fault!" Betsy Waters exclaimed in a note she sent to me several weeks ago. Without knowing what followed, I agreed. Covid-19 bears fault for many things these days. Which one did Betsy have on her mind? I read further:

It's all Covid-19's fault! I, like most of my elderly friends, was pretty miserable the first few weeks of the Pandemic. Then, when my Visa card arrived with all zeroes, I was confused. My family informed me the card was correct . . . I had not used it!

The next few months convinced me that I can live quite well with no weekly shopping sprees! I can look in my closet and realize clothes from recent years will be just fine!

Did it take staying home to convince me that buying, "going and doing" are not necessary for a happy life?

I laughed because I had seen something similar. While our Visa bill increased due to buying supplies online which couldn't be found in local stores, our debit card purchases fell off dramatically. Sheltering at home meant no quick trips to pick up something at the grocery store, drug store, or big chain store. Fewer trips also meant fewer visits to the gas station. Any shopping trip was planned and careful lists made. Amazingly, one trip every week or two replaced the multiple quick trips we had taken before.

Betsy, however, drew a life lesson from the enviable zero balance on her credit card: she was just as happy and content staying close to home as she was when she was out and about. Sure, she missed seeing her family and friends as much as she wanted, but she discovered that she did not need more things or activities to fill her days. Like most of us, she had what she needed right with her.

"I have learned to be content with whatever I have," Paul wrote to his friends in Philippi. "Do not worry about anything," he said.

In these days of the Covid-19 pandemic, public unrest, economic hardship and uncertainty, political bickering, anxiety about how best to educate our children, frustration with people who do not take the virus seriously, and fear that we might be the next one to test positive, I want to say to Paul, “Well, that’s easy for you to say! You didn’t live with the kinds of problems that we face today!”

No, he didn’t. In Paul’s world, he only had to referee infighting in the churches that he had established. He only had to depend upon people all over the known world to fund his ministry and help other believers who lived on the edge. Paul only had to deal with an oppressive Roman government which did not look kindly upon the upstart religion based on the resurrection of a man from the dead, especially since its own emperor was considered a god. Paul only had to deal with multiple imprisonments, countless beatings, hunger, ridicule, physical challenges, unreliable companions, and tensions between Jewish and Gentile believers—all of whom professed faith in the same Jesus Christ.

When Paul writes, “I have learned to be content with whatever I have,” we ought to pay attention because he does know what he is talking about. Like Betsy and many of you, I would suppose, Paul discovered that in the most trying of times, we can be content with the gifts God has given to us.

Anne Whitaker is another wise soul who discovered this truth over the past few months. Always conscious of how her mother lived, Anne, like many of us, marveled at Wilba Rae. She spent a lot of time alone, especially in her later years. She lived alone—which was her preference. Yet, instead of causing her to withdraw and focus on her own needs and desires, Wilba Rae’s contentment with her circumstances opened up opportunities for kindness and generosity toward other people.

Over these past months of sheltering at home, keeping distance, and having to find equilibrium all alone, Anne discovered that despite many concerns, even worries, she was okay—just as her mother had been. She also took advantage of opportunities to do kind things for other people which they could not do for themselves. “I am content in my circumstances, just like Wilba Rae,” she told me, and added, “For that, I am truly grateful.” Paul said, “I have learned to be content with whatever I have . . . I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”

To be sure, contentment can easily be misconstrued. To be content is to find satisfaction with life as it is, even though it might be difficult and challenging and we want something more or different. Does that mean that we acquiesce or settle for things as they are? If so, why work hard to provide a better life for myself or my family? Why spend so much on education if I can be content with what I can get without one? And why strive to make things better, fairer, more just if I am to be content with my lot in life?

Such an interpretation is not biblical contentment. The people of God have always looked toward a “promised land.” In the Old Testament, such a hope meant land, food, prosperity, freedom, and blessing. Jesus shifted that hope from a physical place to a spiritual way of being. He talked about the Kingdom of God being in our midst, a community in which the Spirit of God permeates all that we do, a neighborhood of grace where all people live contented lives. Paul told his Philippian friends that he knew what it was like to be well-fed and hungry, to have plenty and to be in need, but it did not stop him from asking for help when he needed it. Paul’s contentment did not prevent his friends from coming to his aid because they knew that he would always be Paul, God’s sharer-of-good-news, regardless of his circumstances.

No, contentment does not mean that we have to settle for a life that does not supply what we need to thrive as a child of God. Nor does it mean that we can settle for a world in which other children of God do not have what they need in order to thrive. Contentment simply means that when we are challenged in difficult times or even inconvenienced in the best of times, we recognize that our well-being does not depend on external things or circumstances alone. There is that peace, that scriptural *shalom*, which is a wholeness of body, mind, and spirit that only God can provide. When we discover that things in and of themselves cannot bring us a sense of well-being, we can allow the Spirit of God to fill us with peace.

In the same way, contentment does not mean that we never worry about anything. We do worry—and often for very good reason. When Paul told his friends, “Do not worry about anything,” he did not mean for us to stop being interested in and concerned about what is going on in life. Paul worried about a lot of things including his churches, relationships between individuals, the needs of the poor, and the false teachings that were infecting the faith. His letters are filled with his worries and pleas and prayers for people to do better at taking care of one another. However, Paul did not want anyone to become paralyzed by their fears, so he advised, “in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And

the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.” The crux of contentment is having your life grounded in God to the extent that you ask God to give you peace in the midst of the most trying circumstances—even a pandemic, with public unrest, economic hardship and uncertainty, political bickering, anxiety about how best to educate our children, frustration with people who do not take the virus seriously, and fear that we might be the next one to test positive. Opening our lives to God in trust and gratitude makes space for the peace that we do not understand but which helps us make the most of each and every day, just as God intended from the beginning.

Ann Bishop offered me a perfect 21st century glimpse of this truth when she wrote,

I no longer take the advantage of technology for granted since the virus became part of our lives. Our daughter, her family, our 3 grandsons and 3 great grandchildren live in Georgia. They can no longer visit us twice a year as before. Our daughter has a new house and next door to her our oldest grandson is building a new house for his family (wife, son, daughter and new 4 month old daughter) . Thanks to the technology of videos and Zoom we have been able to visit and feel that we were there in person.

How hard it is to be away from family and friends these days! Relationships feed our souls. Family is all about spending time together. Not being able to be with parents, children, grandchildren, and great-grandchildren is excruciating. Being the church is all about being together. Having to worship at home instead of together here in our sanctuary is hard! But thanks be to God that through the gift of technology we can see each other and talk to one another and feel as if we are together. Even while we are apart, because we can be in touch, we can be content.

We do not have to deny ourselves to the point of physical harm nor do we need to gorge ourselves to the point of our own demise. God invites us to know what we need and what we do not need, to recognize what is of value and what is not. What remains will bring us contentment. Such awareness will bring us the peace of God. That is why Paul urged his friends to spend their time focused on things that are true and honorable, just and pure, pleasing and commendable, excellent and worthy of praise. Pay attention to these things, he encouraged them, and you will be content.

Matthew's story of the feeding of the multitude illustrates this truth in a profound way. An enormous crowd of 5000 men plus women and children trekked to a "deserted place" where Jesus had gone to be alone and pray. They wanted to be together and hear him speak. They wanted to be healed of their ailments. After a long day of stories and sermons and healing, it was getting late and the disciples, duly concerned about the needs of the people, politely told Jesus it was time to wrap it up so the folks could go home and get supper. With a wink, Jesus said, "You feed them!" Shocked, tired, and probably a good bit annoyed, the disciples responded, "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish." With a grin, Jesus said, "Great! Watch this!"

He had everyone sit down on the grass. He held up the two fish and five loaves and prayed for God's blessing. Then he started passing the food around. Matthew tells us that everyone had plenty to eat with twelve baskets of leftovers. Everyone was content and there was still an abundance of food. Jesus' point was that you will never know what you need until you take stock of what you have. Scripture calls what happened a miracle. To me it looks like the Promised Land, the Kingdom of God, the Community of the Spirit, a Neighborhood of Grace. It looks like how God wants us to live day by day.

If you want to be content, pay attention to what God has already provided. Find out where there are needs that still exist. Bring the two together and, as the Bible says, God will be there with you.

Won't it be amazing, in the months and years to come when we look back on these days, to realize that it was Covid 19's fault that we discovered how blessed we are and how we can be a blessing to one another. May God grant us all peace and contentment. Amen.

August 2, 2020

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

We know a little bit more about deserted places these days, O God. Staying home has kept us at more than arm's length from one another. When we shop for essential goods, the stores are not nearly as crowded as they once were. Only the drive through lines at our favorite restaurants are crowded, but we are still apart. Jesus went to deserted places to have time alone with you. Now, we go to deserted places because we want to be with other people. Perhaps you meet us there regardless of who else shows up. For that we are grateful. For that we rejoice.

Continue to tend our lives with compassion and care, we pray. Things are so complicated right now that no decision seems simple. Emotions are on edge because of all the stress we feel. Fear stalks us by day and wants to lie beside us at night. Keep our hearts and minds clear and strong so that we will not succumb to the threats that surround us. Keep our bodies healthy so that we will not succumb to the virus that has changed life as we know it. Keep our spirits lifted up so that we will bear witness to the hope that is ours and share the peace that only you can offer.

You continue to remind us that out of seeming scarcity you always produce abundance. Our prayer, and the prayer of the world, is that you will guide scientists and physicians to a vaccine that will protect us and a cure that will spare lives. In the mean time, take care of all who are ill. Bolster the energy of our caregivers and refresh their bodies and spirits so that they can minister to our health and well-being.

Send your Spirit among us that we might stop battling one another over issues of justice and equity, kindness and compassion, right and wrong, faith and folly. Open our hearts and minds, our ears and eyes, so that we might see as you see, hear as you hear, and love as you love. In so doing, may we all claim our calling as little Christs sent to help you save the world.

We pray that this week the children who participate in NoteBusters will recognize that music is a gift of the Spirit which brings meaning, inspiration, and fulfillment to our lives. May they discover their own song of joy and the ability they have to bless the world with the gift of music.

Step into the wilderness places of our lives, O God, and commune with us, we pray. Then welcome our family and friends there, too, where we might all celebrate the abundance of your grace and goodness, through Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen.