

CONTENTMENT VS. HAPPINESS

1 Timothy 6: 6-19

It is no secret that I am a big fan of children's books. One of my very favorites is called the Quiltmakers Gift, by Jeff Brumbeau. This is the story of a Quiltmaker and a king. The Quiltmaker was known in the kingdom of making the most beautiful quilts. She lived in her little home high above the village stitching her quilts day in and day out. As soon as she finished a quilt she would go into the village during the night and cover one of the many poor homeless people trying to sleep on the cold ground. Then she would return home, have a cup of tea and go to bed, her heart filled with contentment. The next morning, she would get up and start all over again making another quilt.

As the story goes... "Now at this time there also lived a very powerful and greedy king who liked nothing better than to receive presents. The hundreds of thousands of beautiful gifts he got for Christmas and his birthday were never enough. So, a law was passed that the king would celebrate his birthday twice a year. When that still wasn't enough, he ordered his soldiers to search the kingdom for those few people who had not yet given him a gift. Over the years, the king had come to own almost all of the prettiest things in the world. Throughout the castle, from top to bottom, in drawers and on shelves, in boxes and trunks and closets and sacks, all of the king's countless things were stashed. Things that shimmered and glittered and glowed. Things whimsical and practical. Things mysterious and magical. So many, many things that the king kept a list of all the lists of things he owned. And yet with all these marvelous treasures to enjoy, the king never smiled. He was not happy at all. "Somewhere there must be one beautiful thing that will finally make me happy," he was often heard to say. "And I will have it!" One day a soldier rushed into the palace with news about a magical quiltmaker who lived in the mountains. The king stamped his foot. "And how is it that this person has never given me one of her quilts as a gift?" he demanded. "She only makes them for the poor, Your Majesty," the soldier replied. "And she will not sell them for any amount of money." "Well, we shall see about that!" the king roared.

The king proceeds to beg, cajole and finally threaten the Quiltmaker with dire circumstances if she did not make him a quilt. Eventually, the Quiltmaker agrees to make the King a quilt, but only after the king has given everything he owns away. The King was not too happy about having to part with his precious treasure trove, but he starts meeting this one demand. So the King sets about the world giving away all he owns. First he gifts all from his Kingdom, but still he has hundreds of thousands of things. So he begins to travel and eventually manages to give all his things away. By now, the once sharply dressed King is literally wearing rags...but that is not the only thing that has changed about him...during the time in which he gave all his precious things away, a curious thing began to happen. One day, as the king watched a child play with a toy given to him by the king, the king laughed with joy. It was a sound he had not heard in so long that it startled him...but he found he liked it...he liked it very much.

During this time, the Quiltmaker has been stitching a quilt for the king...but when he comes to tell her he has finally given away all his possessions as the Quiltmaker is putting the last stitch into his quilt, he realizes he no longer wants the quilt. In fact, his clothes in tatters, all of his treasures gone, the king realizes he has never been happier."

The Apostle Paul tells us in 1 Timothy 6: "Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these." Paul also wrote to the church at Philippi: "I 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. Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have.”

I have learned to be content with whatever I have... These are powerful words for us today... these are the kind of words I need to have on a plaque in every room of my home. First Timothy 6:6-19 opens with the observation that “there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment” (v. 6). Here, contentment has to do with well-being characterized not by smug satisfaction but rather by profound gratitude such that no matter what we have, we genuinely feel that enough is too much already. When this kind of gratitude is directed to God, contentment becomes almost synonymous with godliness as thanksgiving – even for the most basic provisions – prompting us to place our trust in God’s gracious purposes. What makes the faithful content, what gives them a sense of well-being, has little to do with what human wealth can offer (vv. 7-8).

Are contentment and happiness the same thing? The final line of the story of the King in my opening illustration concludes with these words... “the king realizes he has never been happier.” But is this the same as being content? I ask this because the NRSV (New Revised Standard Version) uses the word content in verse 6; “Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment,” while the CEB (Common English Bible) uses the word ‘happy’ in a sentence that really defines being content, “being happy with what you already have.” So, is one state of being dependent upon the other? Well, like the true millennial woman I am, when in doubt, there is always Google, or in the instance Facebook! A quick Facebook query resulted in remarkably similar responses. Overwhelmingly, people said that happiness and contentment are not the same. People liken happiness to an emotion which is usually tied to specific events and can be very fleeting, whereas contentment is more a state of being regardless of your circumstances – which is what I think Paul is saying in his letter to Timothy.

Paul says that our contentment is spiritual in nature, and that the insatiable desire of the King and of many in our world today to have more and more is actually a huge spiritual flaw. You know those bumper stickers, “Whoever dies with the most toys, wins!” And the variations along this theme. One I can particularly identify with is, “Whoever dies with the most fabric, wins!” Again, Paul says, “There is great gain in godliness combined with contentment, for we brought nothing into the world so that we can take nothing out of it; but if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these” (vv. 6-8). Paul argues for what we might call a diet of “enough-ness,” or that feeling of being full of enough of the right things that we don’t crave the wrong ones. As “rich” food can be harmful to the body, so the pursuit of material riches can be harmful to the soul.

Paul is also making an appeal for the early church not to be seduced by the pleasures and materialism of the world, which can lead a person away from the faith. Rather, Paul invites the reader to begin living into the kingdom of God which Jesus established on earth. We are to do this by pursuing righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, and gentleness now, not some time in the unknown future when Christ returns. In other words, eternal life is not something we look forward to, it is something that has arrived because Christ has arrived and brought eternity into our midst. (Feasting on the Word, Year C, volume 4 pg. 112).

In fact, Paul offers up his own list of *four harmful things* that people can consume that will “plunge” them into “ruin and destruction” and “pierce” them with “many pains” (v. 9-10).

1. Discontent (v. 6) – Discontent saturates a life that is bent on overconsumption. We seem always to want what we cannot have instead of wanting what we already have. Paul argues that contentment is a key to health, that happiness is not having what you want, but wanting what you have. Contentment is recognizing that we are dependent on God's provision (“our daily bread” as Jesus puts it). It's not something we earn but is rather a gift from God. When we are content with what we have, our appetites tend to be fully satisfied, and we can bypass the junk.

2. Harmful desires (v. 9) – The pursuit of riches can cause people to fall into temptation and leave them “trapped by many senseless and harmful desires.” Just as Junk food can be addicting and junk riches can lead us to fill up on the empty promise that material gain will make us happier. Many are those who have dedicated their lives to the pursuit of money only to find that, in the end, they were poorer for it.

3. Love of money (v. 10) – The old saying that “money is the root of all evil” isn't actually what Paul says here. It's not money itself that's the problem, just like fat and sugar themselves aren't the real problems in our diets. We actually need them to live, just like we need money. But we need them in moderation, and we need them in perspective. When we crave money instead of merely building it into a healthy lifestyle, we're bound to make ourselves fat with it.

4. Eagerness to be rich (v. 10) – When we're eager to fatten up on riches, we can become envious of those who have more than we do. The more we pursue a lifestyle beyond our means as a way of keeping up, putting our faith in money to make us happy, the more likely we are to wander away from the faith that actually sustains us.

Paul has a solution, a holy prescription for all who are focused on the stuff of this earth instead of the riches stored up in heaven. He tells the people where Timothy is serving:

Set your hopes on God and not on your riches (v. 17) – as the hundreds of thousands of gifts did not make the King happy, ultimately it doesn't make us happy or healthy, Only God – the One who “richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment” – can make us both happy and content.

Be rich in good works (v. 18) – Paul urges people not to be known by the size of their bank accounts. Instead, they should be rich in the amount of good they do for others. Putting money to work for others provides good, nutritious fuel for the soul, burning off the excess fat and making others healthy in body, mind and spirit.

Be generous and ready to share (v. 18) -- When we share with others, we “store up the treasure of a good foundation for the future.” Jesus called it “treasure in heaven,” or that which puts us in line with the way of God's kingdom. And this, along with learning to be content in all things, is really the bottom line of this passage.

I would venture to guess that everyone here is familiar with this line from the 23rd Psalm, in the King James Version: “The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want.” But what does it mean? Some people hear that line and see it as a pledge not to desire anything. But that's not it at all. What the psalmist means by “I shall not want” is better expressed by some modern translations that render this line: “There is nothing I lack.” Or, as another version puts it, turning the phrase around and expressing it positively: “The Lord is my shepherd, I have everything I need.” Rabbi Harold Kushner, in his devotional commentary on the 23rd Psalm, relies on the wisdom of a friend of his, who says the verse really means, “The Lord is my shepherd, what more do I need?” It's a statement of satisfaction, of

sufficiency, of contentment that goes against the grain of our hyper-materialistic consumer society. (Homiletics Magazine, 2016)

After years of extensive research, psychologists have discovered at least nine practices – all of which are under our control – that lead to contentment. What I find especially compelling is that all nine of these happiness traits are taught in the Bible They are also confirmed by experience. So, when it comes to overall life contentment, science, experience and Scripture are in complete agreement. The following nine attitudes and behaviors make people content:

Contented people use trials as growth opportunities.

Contented people cultivate optimism.

Contented people focus on the present.

Contented people practice forgiveness.

Contented people practice generosity.

Contented people nurture relationships.

Contented people express gratitude.

Contented people care for their bodies.

Contented people care for their souls.

(Martin Thielen, *Searching for Happiness: How Generosity, Faith, and Other Spiritual Habits Can Lead to a Full Life* (Westminster John Knox, 2016), 17.)

Finally, there is the story of a man who had taken his son on a trip to the country, supposedly to visit a relative; in actuality, however, the trip was to show his son how poor country folks live. They stayed the weekend in the home of a relative who was a very humble farmer. At the end of the trip, as they were in route back home, the father asked his son, “What did you think of the trip?”

The son replied, “Very nice, Dad.”

Then the father asked, “Did you notice how they lived?”

The son replied, “Yes.”

The father continued, “What did you learn?”

The son responded, “I learned that we have one dog in our house, and they have four. Also, we have a fountain in our garden filled with goldfish, but they have a trout stream that has no end. And where we have imported lamps in our garden, they have the stars! And while our garden goes to the edge of our neighbor’s fence, they have the entire horizon as their back yard!”

At the end of the son’s reply the father was speechless. The son then said, “Thank you, Dad, for showing me how poor we really are.”

Of course, there is great gain in godliness combined with contentment; “for we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it”, and from Philippians “for I have learned to be content with whatever I have”.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.