

Contentment

Philippians 4:11b-13; Psalm 23:1

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North Decatur Presbyterian Church

Rev. David Lewicki, preaching

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 the one who strengthens me.

The Lord is my shepherd. I shall not want.

I hope you've noticed by now that we are moving around the feelings wheel. I hope no one's getting emotional whiplash! The truth is, we all experience lots of emotions, even in the course of one day, sometimes we feel them all at the same time! Feeling the feels.

Today we explore "contentment." We're back in the happiness family of emotions. We've talked about joy, which is a kind of peak happiness; contentment is "quieter." It's low-key happy. Subdued. But this quiet emotion may be the foundation of your enduring wellbeing.

What is contentment? When we asked that question on Monday on Zoom and explored our experiences of contentment, and two beautiful images came up. One is **porch sitting**. For us southerners especially, porch sitting is peak contentment. Why? For one, you're at rest. You've put aside all striving when you're on the porch. All of those "fight or flight" feelings that put us on edge—the fear, anger, and anxiety—we put them aside, too. On the porch, you sink into just being. You're in a liminal space between the safety of your home, yet still able to behold "the peace of Wild Things," a natural world that neither "toils nor spins." On the porch you find the best of both worlds.

Another image of contentment that came up in our conversation that many of you will resonate with is this one: **a purring cat**. I'm not a cat person, but even I could connect to this—a calm cat in your lap is the image of contentment. For you **dog people** out there, a contented dog can work just as well. These animals can convey a feeling that "all is well" in the world. The magical thing is that we can feel contentment through and with them.

Contentment is a feeling that there is something good and right about the world and your place in it. It's an equanimity. It's acceptance of what is—but it's more than acceptance; it's a way of blessing what one has accepted. We might even call contentment a feeling of harmony—even cosmic harmony. The 14th century English mystic **Julian of Norwich** said of this feeling, "all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well." (Julian's relationship to cats; maybe she learned contentment from the cat).

I wish I felt contentment all the time. I don't know about you, but I don't. What undermines your feeling content? When you start making a list—it feels like everything and *everybody*

undermines it! It sometimes feels like there's a "discontentment industrial complex." We've mentioned in this series how emotionally disruptive media can be—media feeds our discontent by manufacturing our hot emotions—anger, fear, anxiety. Social media breeds discontent through comparison—on Instagram, everyone is in Paris on vacation looking hot and happy and their kids just got into MIT. Comparison makes us discontented. We can all go on a media diet, or fast. Or smash our phones and go off the grid.

But you and I are up against even bigger challenges when we try to find contentment. American culture itself is built on an architecture of discontent. Does that sound hyperbolic? Look at our economic system. Capitalism is so powerful and so dynamic; but what is the fuel for the system? Discontent. For our economy to "work," you and I can never be happy with what we have. Capitalism has a spiritual sickness at its heart: an obsession with the new or novel, and with more of everything. There's never "enough."

It's not just the economic system in which we all participate that feeds our discontent. Thomas Jefferson wrote in our Declaration of Independence that we are endowed by our Creator with inalienable rights, among these are "life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness." Pursuing happiness is our divine prerogative. Yet research shows that one of the worst ways to be happy is to *pursue happiness*. People who actively try to be happier report higher levels of unhappiness due to their effort. It's funny in a sad way.

It's important to acknowledge that you and I have all these headwinds against us that push us away from contentment. But fortunately, we know a lot about what creates contentment. It's not complicated; it doesn't require buying anything.

Think back to our conversation about joy; one of the things we said about joy is that we are likely to find joy not through things, but through the feeling of being connected. A meaningful life creates joy and contentment. All those things we are told we should want—money, fame, beauty—that send us toward striving, toward wanting, all fail to deliver contentment.

Two things create contentment in every person's life. meaningful activities and good relationships. This shouldn't shock you. But it's worth saying because it's so simple that many of us don't believe it and don't practice it, we don't organize our lives around these things as much as we should.

What do we mean by meaningful activities—how do they bring us contentment? You need to think about what's important to you and then live that way. That's what creates states of being psychologists call flow and engagement. Flow is getting lost in an activity that you love for its own sake. Sports and dance and things with our bodies are great for flow. So is making music and art. So is reading and cooking and gardening.

Engagement is similar—being engaged is being involved in an activity that makes you feel like you are the person you want to be. You might find engagement (and even flow) in your

work. I do. I love my work—I naively think that the church is a good thing in the world. Every day isn't fun, but deep down, being a pastor is meaningful and engaging for me. Some of us don't love our jobs—or loved them once, but now are kind of going through the motions, but need the income. I get it. The great news is that work doesn't have to be the only meaningful thing we do. Sometimes we work to afford the leisure activities that give us meaning. Making other's lives better—what Jesus called “serving”—is one of the best ways to foster a life of contentment. I sometimes wish I could require volunteering with one of our ministry partners as a condition of membership, because I know that when you do it, it makes your life better. You feel good, you feel connected, you feel the love of God moving around you and in you. Meaning can come through parenting, grandparenting. Through political organizing. Volunteering at the local elementary school. You get the idea. When we put our bodies into activities that create flow and engagement, we create a life of meaning that brings contentment.

But there is something even more immediate that you can do to increase your contentment. If you want to do one thing to make your life better today, call someone you love or go get a beer with them. Jonathan Haidt, one of the great scholars of happiness working in the US today, writes, “if you want to predict how happy someone is, or how long she will live, you should find out about her social relationships.” The Harvard Longevity study has been following people over the course of their lifetimes since 1938. It's the most comprehensive study of human psychology across the span of a lifetime ever conducted. What is the single most important factor in human happiness? It's other people.

When you feel connected—seen, appreciated, loved—you know that the world is OK. We know God made us for relationships. We love being with people, even us introverts—just fewer of them. Family, friends, work colleagues, neighbors. Love each other—because it's good for others and it's good for us. I saw two of you out at the Decatur Book Festival this weekend. I saw a bunch more of you here on Thursday—out in the garden, at Knit Wits. When you engage in relationships, you feel content.

It's almost disappointingly simple, isn't it? Meaningful activities and strong relationships.

I love how thin the line is here between psychology and theology. We've studied contentment in the lab—we've pinned down it's sources. But did psychology tell us something that Christians don't already know?

Meaningful activities? We knew that. Our common mission in the church to be the healing, forgiving presence of Christ in the world. The greatest among you is the one who serves. Lose your life to save it. Strong relationships? We are part of the Body of Christ in which every part of the body is honored.

This Christian tradition is a story about the world that moves us toward contentment.

- We proclaim not an empty, soulless, directionless world, but a world permeated by God who loves the world.

- God made the world and put together all its pieces so everything and everyone fits and everything is good—that's contentment.
- God hears us when we cry out, God gives us manna to eat, our "daily bread"—"I shall not want." That is contentment.
- God who gives us a moral law to order our lives and push back the chaos of immorality; that is contentment.
- God is like a shepherd, who leads us to green pastures and still waters, and through the valley of the shadow of death.
- Our God stills storms, heals bodies, feeds the hungry, calls us into love. God even breaks the power of death. That is contentment.
- God is not out there. God is not abstract, an idea. The indwelling presence of God by the Holy Spirit is as close as your breath, this divine presence is peace.

Christianity doesn't deny hardship and struggle; it faces all of what is and says "there is a love that holds it all."

This faith brings contentment. We don't say it that way. We say, "I have learned to be content with whatever I have." We say, "I shall not want." We say, "all shall be well, and all shall be well, and all manner of thing shall be well."