

The First Baptist Church, Midland
July 17, 2011
Philippians 4:10-14

I Have Learned To Be Content
A Sermon by the Rev. John P. Dick
Theme: To Be Content

The popular writer, John Ortberg, shares a story about his three children when they were young. Whenever they were getting ready as a family to go out to eat and they had a choice in determining the restaurant, their voices rang in chorus... *McDonalds*. The "shrine of the golden arches" as he called it was their one and only choice. And they always wanted the same thing... that combination of food and a little prize. It's not much of a prize, really, just some cheap little plastic thing, but in a moment of marketing genius the folks at McDonald's gave it a particular name. They called it the Happy Meal. That's right, it's "the meal of great joy." You aren't just buying chicken McNuggets and a tiny plastic Hercules ring, you're buying happiness.

Now of course, Ortberg said he would try to talk them out of it. "Order whatever you want," he would say, "and I'll give you a quarter so you can buy your own trinket and everyone will come out ahead." Of course it never worked and the chant would soon ensue... "We want a Happy Meal. We want a Happy Meal." Other customers would now be staring at the skinflint of a father who didn't want to buy his kids the meal of great joy.

So he would give in and buy the Happy Meal. "And they really were happy," he said, "for about a minute and a half." Unfortunately, the happy wore off. The contentment didn't last.

Now wouldn't you think that kids being fairly bright these days would sooner or later catch on to this deal and say, "You know, I keep getting these Happy Meals and they don't give me lasting happiness, so I'm not going to be a sucker any more." But it never happens. They keep buying Happy Meals and they keep not working.

Then somewhat pensively Ortberg reflected... Of course, only a child would be so foolish. Only a kid would be so naive as to think that contentment could be acquired through some kind of external acquisition. Only someone very young would have a high enough stupid quotient to believe that lasting happiness could come by a change in external circumstances. Right?

"No," he finally confesses, "The truth about human beings is that as we grow up, we don't get any smarter; our Happy Meals just keep getting more expensive... and the world around us continues to tell us that happiness is always just one Happy Meal away." (James A. Harnish. "Finding God in Strange Places." Hyde Park Church, Tampa, Florida, October 12, 1997)

Well, I chuckle when I read this but deep down I know it was all too true. This is the seductive trap that consumes our culture. It's simply human nature to think that life will be great and that all will be well if only... well, you fill in the blank. What is it that you feel you need to make you feel happy and content?

Harry Emerson Fosdick, one of my heroes of the pulpit, once made a common sense observation about attitude and contentment that is very helpful. And it reaches well beyond the parameters of consumerism. He said that in his ministry which spanned some 45 years he had known three kinds of people. There were those who carried resentment toward life. Theirs was the attitude that expressed: "I am misfortune's favorite son or daughter. I never am treated fairly. Things never work equitably for me. I am always cheated. I never get what I deserve." They weren't very content. He concluded that you will never get any great living from them.

Then there was a second group who believe life consists pretty much of receiving what you deserve, that you earn what you get. They recognize that there have been occasions when they have been cheated and times when they have been fortunate. Yet when the ledger is counted up, they received about what they deserved. They broke even. They are content some of the time and disappointed in life other times, but all in all it works out okay. Fosdick concluded that you never get any truly great living from them either.

But then there was what he called a choice few – a tithe of humanity whose attitude toward life was altogether different. They recognize that there have been times in their lives when they have been mistreated, but when they look at life as a whole they are amazed at the grace they have experienced because of God's love. These are the persons who know that when life is taken as a whole they have received what they could never earn or deserve. These are the people who are content and, he concluded, it's from these folk that the finest living comes.

As I think about Dr. Fosdick's wisdom, I hear him creating a portrait of a person who is truly joyful and he is further suggesting that it is this person who will undoubtedly contribute the most to the Kingdom of God. "But ah," we say, "how can I be this person?"

The answer, I believe, is clearly found in the book that is often referred to as the *Epistle of Joy*, Paul's letter to the Philippian church. And it is summed up in one simple verse: "**I have learned in whatever state I am, to be content.**" (Phil. 4:11b) Now this is a remarkable affirmation especially when one considers the circumstances of its author.

It was Charles Allen in his book, *In Quest of God's Power*, that described the great apostle in this way. "This man who learned to be content had no home, no wife, and no children. He had a few close friends, but just before he died he saw most of them desert him and turn away. He was brutally beaten many times. He spent many nights in jail. Most of his life was lived in poverty, and often he was denied the barest necessities. He knew what it was to be hungry and cold."

Yet he said he had learned in whatever state he found himself to be content. Incredible! But just what do you suppose he meant? What does it mean, after all, to be content? Well, contentment is that deep down, soul satisfying sense of peace. It is an enduring serenity that is not dependent upon the achievements or experiences of the moment or the day. It is that assurance which gives you the freedom and energy to express yourself and to follow your dreams despite what others might think. It is that ability to fall asleep at night without fretting about what might have been.

Contentment is very different from happiness though the two are often confused. Happiness is usually far more shallow than contentment and is most often contingent upon something external.

Consider an example... a multi-million dollar example. In a community where I formerly pastored, there was a family who won the lottery. Their lives were turned upside down. And in gratitude to God, they committed much of their good fortune to their church so the congregation could build a family life center.

And build it they did. It was incredible and included every amenity of the day. And everyone was happy... except, unfortunately, the family who won the big prize. Their relationship was evidently on the rocks and the temporary respite from the financial windfall deluded them. They soon realized that the money wouldn't salve all wounds and it couldn't fix what was broken. They divorced, went their separate ways taking their shares of the money with them along with their grief. And the church was left high and dry with a huge mortgage (the money had been promised in annual installments). In the end, everyone suffered because the balloon burst.

You see the point, I'm sure. In a moment the dream was shattered and replaced with the hard lesson that happiness is fleeting at best. Now please don't misunderstand. This is not to insinuate that being happy is wrong. No, we all need and deserve to enjoy this feeling of great pleasure that comes with being happy. But it is to say that most of the time these feelings are temporary at best and do not provide the foundation for great living because they are dependant on something happening outside of ourselves.

On the other hand, there is a better way to find happiness which is enduring. It is called *contentment*. Contentment can be defined as that deep, inner condition of knowing that you have found yourself – and that you are courageously trying to be the person God is calling you to be. That, my friends, is why Paul could say he had learned to be content in any state. And the good news is he shared this learning in a way that makes it possible for all to grow from his experience. This insight is found in his letter to the young apostle, Timothy.

It should be noted that Timothy was a very special person in Paul's eyes. He was like a son whom he had personally nurtured in the faith. This book is essentially a good old father-son chat outlining the demands and responsibilities of the exciting pastoral life he had chosen. And Paul wanted to be sure Timothy would fall into Fosdick's third

group where he would contribute faithfully to the world understanding what it meant to be content. Toward that end he made three suggestions.

First he wanted the young apostle to understand the importance of being content with what you have. **“We brought nothing into this world,”** he said, **“and we cannot take anything out of the world.”** It’s true... life is always initiated in a state of total dependence and when we reflect upon where we stand in the present moment, we see just how far we have come. Indeed, God does supply our every need and we should be satisfied with what we have.

Second, Paul encouraged Timothy not to get caught up in a mad drive for the wealth and riches of this world because it will only lead to emptiness. In his words: **“Those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and destruction. For the love of money is the root of all kinds of evil, and in their eagerness to be rich some have wandered away from the faith...”**

Of course, Paul is talking about a distorted sense of priorities. He is not suggesting there is anything wrong with money. Wealth can be and should be an instrument for good. The problem is the love of money – that temptation which causes a person to abandon values and morals in order to accrue great wealth. This is what leads to emptiness and leads one away from great living.

Finally, Paul reminds Timothy to build his life upon a sincere faith in God. Or as the apostle put it: **“Pursue righteousness, godliness, faith, love, endurance, gentleness. Fight the good fight of the faith; take hold of the eternal life, to which you made the good confession...”** And this, my friends, says it all.

Be content with what you have and who you are!

Do not be solely motivated by a desire for the wealth and riches of this world!

Build your life upon a sincere faith in God!

So now to the question... have these lessons found a place in your heart? If the answer is yes, then you have discovered the key to being content. If the answer is no, then there may still be some struggle to find that inner peace. But don’t be disheartened for every new day brings new opportunity and today may be your day to be blessed through life’s graces and to truly make a difference.

So may it be... *So May It Be!*