

## “Learning to be content”

### Philippians 4

(Two disclaimers before I begin the message: When I speak of the steps to contentment, I am not automatically implying that those suffering from depression and/or other chronic conditions can achieve the type of contentment Paul is speaking of in these verses. Secondly, neither Paul nor I would condone “being content regardless of any circumstances” in the case of any type of abuse.)

In the early 1800’s the German writer, von Goethe, listed nine requisites for contented living.

- **Health** enough to make work a pleasure;
- **Wealth** enough to support your needs;
- **Strength** enough to battle difficulties;
- **Grace** enough to confess your sins and overcome them;
- **Patience** enough to toil until some good is accomplished;
- **Charity** enough to see good in your neighbor;
- **Love** enough to be helpful to others;
- **Faith** enough to make real the things of God; and
- **Hope** enough to remove all anxious fears concerning the future.

When I was in my twenties **my** list of what I thought would constitute contentment was much less grandiose: to graduate from college, get married, find a teaching job, serve the church, maintain at least \$100 in the bank after writing all the monthly bills, and have

children. All those things actually happened in fairly quick succession - except having children. There were no children year after year after year. These were years of great **discontent** for me, but it was also the time when I discovered how much I love the book of Philippians, especially chapter 4. "The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And, my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.

(Philippians 4:7, 19) Who could not find solace or the hope of contentment in those words?

Now, imagine if you will, a large chart stretched across the front of the sanctuary, and on this end of the chart is written the word "content," along with the number 10. On the other end of the chart are the word "discontent" and the number 1. On this imaginary chart I invite you to place a mental dot on the number from 1-10 that best corresponds to your general level of contentment this morning.

If you placed yourself over here - on the number 10 - congratulations! You might want to just go on downstairs and begin your fellowship time a little early. However, if you find yourself at a less positive level of contentment, I invite you to stick around and discover what the Apostle Paul has to teach us about being content.

Lots of people have a lot to say about contentment. When I googled the word, 4,780,000 entries appeared. Amazon.com has almost 122,000 book titles listed under the subject of "contentment." None of us has to spend more than a few minutes watching television or leafing through a magazine to find advertisers promising satisfied and fulfilled lives if we just take this trip, buy that car, shower with this soap, drink that beverage, earn this much money, and purchase that house.

There once was a wealthy businessman walking along the beach, and he came upon a fisherman lazily sitting beside his boat.

“Why are you just sitting there?” the businessman demanded. “Why aren’t you out catching more fish?”

The fisherman replied: “I’ve caught enough fish for today.”

“Why wouldn’t you want to catch more fish than you need?” asked the rich man.

“What would I do with them?”

Impatiently the businessman replied, “You could earn more money, of course! Then you could buy a better boat so you could go deeper out to sea and catch even more fish. With that money you could purchase good quality nylon nets, catch more fish and make lots more money. Soon you’d have a fleet of boats and be rich like me.”

The fisherman looked at the businessman and said, “Then what would I do?”

“You could sit down and enjoy life,” said the wealthy man.

“Hmmm!” said the fisherman...“isn’t that what I’m doing right now?”

(Philip Parham, *Daily Bread*, 5-18-94)

Much of humankind seems to have bought into the notion that bigger, better, and more will surely lead to a contented life. But then we find that the bigger, better, and more isn’t bringing us the satisfaction we anticipated, so we then pursue the biggest, the best, and the most. Where does the cycle end? When does contentment come? It seems likely that this elusive quest for contentment will continue as long as we try to convince ourselves that “wants” are really “needs.”

Paul and the fisherman seem to have found a way to distinguish between “wants” and “needs.” In Philippians 4, he writes to the church in Philippi: “For 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)

*The Old Woman Who Lived in a Vinegar Bottle* is a children’s tale by Margaret Read MacDonald. It begins like this...“there once was an old woman who lived in vinegar bottle. Don’t ask me why. It was a very cramped house and quite smelly.” The old woman’s complaints about living in a vinegar bottle are heard by a fairy passing by, and the fairy grants the woman her heart’s desire – to move from the vinegar bottle to a nice little cottage with a thatched roof and roses on the walls. Sometime later the fairy returns to check on the old woman who by this time is complaining about the little cottage and expressing her desire to live in a fancy row house in the city. She is granted that wish, too, but before long discontent sets in again. Twice more the fairy grants the old woman’s wish to move, first to a mansion and then to a palace. When even the palace fails to bring contentment and the old woman demands to be Empress of the Universe, the fairy reaches her limit of patience and casts a spell that sends the old woman back to the vinegar bottle. The fairy’s closing words are: “There she shall stay, for if she’s not content there, she won’t be content anywhere. After all, contentment comes from the heart, not the house.” What I didn’t realize in my 20’s , what I still often do not remember, and what I’m pretty sure much of society has not yet figured out is this: Paul – like the fairy in the children’s book – understands that contentment does not come from anything external, but from the peace of the internal.

I have read Philippians 4 hundreds of times, but it wasn’t until I was studying for this message that I noticed in verses 11 and 12 something I had never focused on before. This is why I get excited about the study of scripture! No matter how well we know a story or how many times we have read a passage, there are always fresh insights and new understandings bubbling to the surface.

What I had glossed over so many times in prior readings of verses 11 and 12 was Paul's use of the word "learn." Paul says he had to **learn** to be content; had to **learn** the secret of being content. If he had to **learn** to be content, can we then assume that he once struggled with contentment just like the rest of us? In the past, I've been thoroughly deflated by Paul's declaration of contentment. If he – who had been imprisoned, shipwrecked, publically stripped and beaten, stoned, and run out of countless towns – if he can be content with whatever life throws his way, then why is it such a struggle for me - someone who has had a pretty easy time of it? What I've come to realize and appreciate is that Paul's having to **learn** how to be content should encourage us; it should give us great hope that instead of relying on our own insufficient capabilities to achieve contentment, we can **learn** the secrets to being content.

And, we don't have to look far. Paul provides the secrets in his letter to the Philippians – right from the 4 chapters we have examined together over the past five weeks.

***The first secret to contentment - Trusting in God:*** Paul's reliance on God brings contentment...pure and simple. He is trusting in God's providence, in God's love, and in God's faithfulness. Chapter 4, verse 19: "My God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches."

***The second secret - Being joyful:*** Fourteen times in the 4 chapters of Philippians Paul mentions the word "joy" or "rejoicing." In fact, Philippians is often sub-titled, "the Epistle of Joy." "Continue to rejoice" – 1:8; "Be glad and rejoice" – 2:18; "Rejoice in the Lord always" – 4:4; "I rejoice in the Lord greatly" – 4:10. I ask you: is discontent possible in the presence of exuberant joy? In our choosing to be joy-filled – and being joyful is generally a choice – is it also possible that we are automatically flirting with contentment?

***The third secret - Focusing on others:*** It is not so easy to concentrate on our own personal discontent if we are paying rapt attention to other people. Paul reminds his friends in Philippi to do nothing from selfish ambition or conceit, but always regard others as better than ourselves. “Don’t look to your own interests,” he says. “Look to the interests of others.” - chapter 2:3-4. How contented will we ever be if our primary focus is on our own naval-gazing?

***The fourth secret – praying:*** From the opening words of this epistle we find Paul praying for the Philippians, and they for him. Spiritual practices, such as prayer, take us into the presence of God as nothing else can. Paul urges us to pray and give thanks so that the peace of God, the peace which surpasses all understanding, will guard our hearts and our minds. If peace that surpasses all understanding isn’t contentment, I don’t know what else might be.

***The fifth and most important secret - Looking to Jesus:*** Paul makes it quite clear in chapter 3 that he has willingly given up everything for the privilege of following Jesus. Following the one who emptied himself, took on the form of a servant, humbled himself, and was obedient to the point of death. Following the one who is now exalted at the right hand of God – chapter 2. Paul regards all things that he used to care about as mere rubbish when compared to the gain of following Christ, compared to pressing on toward the goal of eternal life with Jesus. Paul sums up the primary Christo-centric source of his contentment in Philippians 4:13 – perhaps the most significant verse in the entire letter. “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.”

Last year when Pastor Janet came to First Mennonite for her candidating weekend, she talked to the children about her “life verse.” I had never heard the phrase “life verse,” but found it to be a perfect way to describe a Bible passage that has influenced and shaped one’s life in profound ways. My life verse has been and probably always will be the same verse I just mentioned: “I can do all things through Christ who strengthens me.” It is the verse I return to over and over again because it sustains, guides, strengthens, and comforts. It is the verse that inspires the confidence to live into contentment because it promises that I am not alone in trying to figure out life.

In the same way that we are all on a journey of faith, we are all on a journey toward contentment. It is a challenging journey because contentment that transcends circumstance is mighty difficult to achieve. It is a complicated journey because culture clutters our attempts at contentment; and it is a demanding journey because for every two steps toward contentment, there is almost always one step backwards to discontent. Although none of us will likely reach the level of contentment that we covet, this excursion is a continuing education event. By trusting in God, by living with joy, by focusing on others, by practicing spiritual disciplines, and most of all by following the Jesus who strengthens us each step on our journey we can say with the Apostle Paul: “I have **learned** to be content with whatever I have. In any and all circumstances, I have **learned** the secret of contentment.”