

The Quest for Contentment

Philippians 4:4-9 Habakkuk 3:16-19
College Hill Presbyterian Church, Tulsa

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Two weeks ago, during our celebration of World Communion Sunday, we participated in our denomination's annual Peace & Global Witness Offering, formerly known as the Peacemaking Offering. The theme of the sermon that day focused on our calling to be non-violent peacemakers in the world around us. It dealt with working toward an *external* relational peace with others. I made just one brief mention, however, of working toward an *internal* personal sense of peace, that sense of being at peace within one's own skin. I mentioned, "Perhaps we can describe it as serenity, an internal quality of being calm and still even in the midst of the storms we face in life. **It is this internal peace of mind that, for many, seems more and more elusive and hard to hang onto.**" We've all been there. Perhaps some of us are there now.

During this past week, therefore, I felt drawn to explore in greater depth that quest for internal peace within ourselves. The professional field of psychology has contributed much to this discussion, and we will look at some of that in just a moment. The scriptures also have much to say about seeking internal peace. So, let's start there.

The apostle Paul's letter to the Philippians is particularly helpful. It's all about rejoicing. And he wrote this while in prison! Most of us are familiar with Philippians 4:4, "**Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice.**" Why should we rejoice? Because "The Lord is near." We are then encouraged with these words, "**Do not worry about anything**, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God." **We are reminded of the importance of spiritual disciplines in our lives – those things that help you and I connect with the Sacred Presence of God beyond us, God with us, and God within us. We are also reminded of the importance of being grateful and thankful people. Internal peace of mind is impossible without a thankful heart.**

Verse 7 reveals the outcome of all this, "And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus." What, then, is the ultimate source of our peace? It is not ourselves, but God. I personally experience a greater sense of peace just by reminding myself of that simple fact.

Verses 8-9 give further guidance in helping us focus on those things that bring peace of mind. "Whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, **if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.** Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you."

I must confess, however, that I am among those who often find my own focus and attention directed elsewhere. Like to the recent string of one devastating natural disaster after another. Then there's the daily drama and chaos coming out of our nation's capital. And I guarantee you, focusing on that never leads to peace of mind, but rather just increases a sense of anxiety and even fear about the state of the world

we live in. So I encourage us all to **take a break now and again from those things that rob us of peacefulness, joy and contentment.**

Circumstances in life, however, may not always allow us to simply turn off or walk away from stressful or sometimes even harmful situations. So how do we find peace even in the midst of the storms that batter our hearts, minds and lives? A case can be made that **one way of working toward an internal peace of mind comes by understanding and fulfilling what it means to be content.**

1 Timothy 6:6-8 addresses this directly when it states, "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." This passage directs us to ask of ourselves, "**How much is enough?**" and "**Am I truly thankful for who I am and what I have?**"

In our consumer-driven culture we are constantly bombarded by the idea we should be discontented with ourselves until we buy this or acquire that. Only then, we tell ourselves, will we be happy and fulfilled. But it doesn't work that way, does it? And many have learned this lesson the hard way. Many still continue to fall into this trap. During our Time With the Children a few moments ago I explored the meaning and intention behind the definition, "**Contentment is not having all you want but wanting only what you have.**" Contentment is also about learning to **live life fully in the present moment** – today, right now this very minute – not being consumed by either recounting the past or only longing for the future. It's the old "the grass is always greener on the other side of the hill" syndrome.

But again, what about when life is really tough, perhaps even frightening? The apostle Paul addresses this, as well. 2 Corinthians 12:8-10 reveals, "Three times I appealed to the Lord about this, that it would leave me [unfortunately, Paul never tells us what that thorn is his side actually was], but [God] said to me, '**My grace is sufficient for you, for power is made perfect in weakness.**' So, I will boast all the more gladly of my weaknesses, so that the power of Christ may dwell in me. Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ; for whenever I am weak, then I am strong."

I'm not too sure how many of us could ever come to the same realization that we can be content with weakness, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ. Saying that, have you noticed how **holding onto a sense of hope is a crucial element in this quest of seeking internal peace and contentment?**

There's a wonderful visual picture of **hopefulness in the midst of terrible circumstances** found in the Old Testament book of Habakkuk (I challenge you to find that quickly in your Bibles). It was written not long before the Babylonians captured Jerusalem and took its ruling elite into exile in the late 6th century BCE. Picture in your mind the circumstances painted by these poetic words in your mind:

Though the fig tree does not blossom,
and no fruit is on the vines;
though the produce of the olive fails
and the fields yield no food;
though the flock is cut off from the fold
and there is no herd in the stalls,
yet I will rejoice in the Lord;
I will exult in the God of my salvation.

God, the Lord, is my strength;
 God makes my feet like the feet of a deer,
 and makes me tread upon the heights."

- Habakkuk 3:17-19

In the midst of extreme and desperate times, times of failure rather than success, the prophet could still affirm hope, trust and faith in God, even to the point of being able to rejoice. It is my hope and prayer that we can do the same in our lives during difficult times.

Note that being able to rejoice is not a choice. And it is not unaware nor ignorant of tragedy or hard times. Rather, it is grounded in a profound awareness of both the delights and sorrows of life. And also, please take note that **the Bible does not say to rejoice in all your circumstances in life. Rather, it says to "rejoice in the Lord." Always!** Being able to rejoice and find peace is a divine gift that, as Catholic priest Henri Nouwen put it, "does not leave us during illness, grief, oppression, or persecution. It does not depend on the circumstances of our lives, or even on our momentary feelings." Nouwen goes on to state, "**We do have a choice, not so much in regard to the circumstances of our life, but in regard to the way we respond to these circumstances.**"

I found the following online this week in an article entitled, *6 Strategies To Finding Contentment In The Present*, by Melissa Wilder Joyce. She writes, "Finding contentment in the present lies within the walls of deliberately letting go of the worries that we are not where we are supposed to be, but instead attempting to understand that where we actually are is part of our personal journey." That's living in the moment. And I want to close with some wisdom from a blog by Nicole Franco, entitled *5 Simple Actions for Pure Peace and Contentment*. I found it on the website tinybuddha.com. (As you can see, I'm trying to expand my field of resources.) They are:

1. Show humility
2. Recognize enough
3. Simplify life
4. Have real fun
5. Make room for quiet.

Concerning the last point, **making room for quiet**, she writes:

Whether you pray, meditate, listen to nature, or even just be, allow yourself to hear what's in your heart. Connecting with what is inside better prepares you to deal with the exterior world with calmness and peace. Give up control and release yourself to thoughts and emotions that can heal, strengthen, and even surprise you.

Your inner voice often has something to say. You can best recognize that gut feeling that can act as a reliable compass once you turn off all the noisy, messy distracting sounds of life. I describe it as being "plugged in" to the positivity around me. [From a Christian perspective, I'd call it connecting with the Sacred Presence around and within.]

I am not all calmness and peace all the time. I have a full and often chaotic life with children and a job. But, with a few mindful adjustments, I have found a season of contentment, and for that my thankfulness abounds!

May God bless each of you on your journey and quest for a season of contentment. And together let us remember *this* is the day that God has made, so let us rejoice and be glad in it. (from Psalm 118:24)

Amen.

Resources:

Nicole Franco, *5 Simple Actions for Pure Peace and Contentment*, tinybuddha.com

Melissa Wilder Joyce, *6 Strategies to Finding Contentment In the Present*, Huffpost.com