

Cultivating Contentment

Luke 12:15

Hebrews 13:5-6

November 12, 2017

First United Methodist Church, Baraboo

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Today when the Green Bay Packers and the Chicago Bears face off at Soldier Field, most Packer fans will watch the game with fairly low expectations. The Packer's record is 4 and 4. This record is likely to continue to slide for the much of the rest of the season. The team's quarterback Aaron Rodgers broke his collarbone while playing against the Minnesota Vikings on October 15. He had to have surgery a week later. According to a November 4th article in the Wisconsin State Journal Aaron Rodgers really wants to play again, and is not leaving out the possibility of returning this season if he's healed. But he doesn't want to get peoples' hopes up either.

Packer fans may disagree with me, but I believe Rodgers should use this opportunity to exit professional football. Get out now, at the top of his game. Leave now with the hits he's already endured – hits to his body, to his head. Preserve the health he has left after a successful career is what we are realizing is quite a dangerous sport because of the likelihood of developing traumatic brain injury. When has a professional football player had enough? Enough fame? Enough money? Enough glory? It takes discernment to walk away from all that. When is enough, enough?

Do you ever look around your sometimes cluttered house and think “when is enough, enough?” Japanese decorating expert Marie Kondo says: keep only the things that spark joy. There's a cartoon from September 18, 2017 New Yorker magazine. A burglar stopped in his tracks in a late night job. There are jewels, a TV, nice paintings on the wall. He's holding a boom box and the caption reads “do I need it? Does it spark joy?” When is enough, enough?

How would you answer this “fill in the blank” question: “if I only had more _____ I'd be content”? Here's how some people fill in that blank. If only more love in my marriage, I'd be content. If only I had kids who were more mature, and made better decisions, then I'd be content. When I find the love of my life, then I'd be content....when I get a better job....when I get the respect I deserve in the job I have.....then I'll be content. . When I retire.....then I'll be content. We're always needing a little bit more.

Adam Hamilton, in his book “Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity” calls this “restless heart syndrome.” Restless leg syndrome is when twitches and contractions in our leg muscles cause us to constantly feel like we need to move, and it's hard to relax. The primary symptom of the spiritual condition “restless heart syndrome” is discontent. There's never enough. We're never satisfied. The moment we

acquire something we hardly have taken time to enjoy it before we want something else. Restless heart syndrome mostly affects our relationship to money and material goods. The good news is, there is a cure for restless heart syndrome.

Last week we learned six key financial principles that lead to wise use of money which in turn leads to greater joy. These principles were listed on a card given to everyone who came to worship. (If you weren't here last week, you can pick one up from the kiosk in fellowship hall on your way out).

The key to curing restless heart syndrome is putting into practice the first financial principal: pay your tithe and offering first. "Contentment is found" writes Adam Hamilton "in our relationship with God and our relationships with others. This is why Jesus said the two most important things we must do are "love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul and with all your mind" and to "love your neighbor as yourself. (Matthew 22:37, 39). If we keep our focus on these two things, we will find satisfaction for our souls and lasting contentment." Here's the key to contentment: the more we develop a relationship with God revealed in Jesus Christ, the more contentment you will have in your life. God is the genuine and ultimately the sole source of our contentment. Until you come to realize that fact, you will remain uncomfortably restless. Augustine put it this way "thou has made us for thyself, O Lord, and our hearts are restless until they find rest in thee." Writing in the 14th C. Julian of Norwich said "God, of your goodness, give me yourself; you are enough for me....If I ask for anything that is less, I shall always lack something but in you alone I have everything."

So, how do we do we put God first? Here's my story of how I am still learning to do that, how I've found contentment and joy. I was baptized in 1985, Every since becoming a Christian I have found more and more joy. To be honest my restless heart syndrome hasn't gone away completely. I still think there's more books to buy, more time spend at retreat centers, I still believe you can never have too many earrings, I enjoy a vacation as much as anyone and like planning them. But I can tell you my relationship with God revealed in Jesus Christ is something I treasure more than any of these. I have learned it's more important than any other relationship. I've learned to have more joy and contentment. These are things I have cultivated. That has happened through many small decisions; taking time for worship each week for instance. (OK, that's easy, if I show up for work, I'm worshipping!). Every day I set aside time for daily devotions. Regularly I spend time at retreat centers. I make time to do for works of mercy. Over the years I've gone on many mission trips. And putting God first has happened through choices made about how to use money.

I first joined a church as an young adult in the 1980's. I was preparing for life as a Unitarian Universalist minister. As you may know, I began my ministry in a different denomination. Unitarian Universalism is more like a inter-faith religious organization than a Christian church. In that denomination people are free to believe as their conscience dictates. When I joined a UU church in Boston I was in seminary. I was handed a box of giving envelopes and told "you know what to do with these." I had no clue what to do with these giving envelopes. I had no idea what to give to church.

Here's what I figured out on my own. If I didn't go to church I'd probably go to a movie. That would have cost \$3.00. So I gave \$3. It was a start.

In August of 1985 I married a United Methodist pastor and moved to Wisconsin where he was serving three small churches in northwest Wisconsin. That same year I began serving as part-time minister of a Unitarian Universalist congregation. Soon, Jim and I had to decide on how much to give to our churches. He said we should "tithe" meaning we should give 10% of our income back to God.) I said "no way!" (I had not heard of tithing before this.) That seemed like an impossibly high amount. We compromised and began giving 3% of our income to our respective churches and 2% to other charities. Over the years, we gradually increased that percentage until we reached 10% -- a tithe. In that time, I also gradually began to put Christ at the center of my life. I was part of Jim's UM churches as a pastor's spouse, and my own Christian journey was continuing at that time too. In time, that meant leaving the UU ministry, became a full time mom for six years, and eventually was ordained as a United Methodist pastor. Over those years, I have gradually grown closer to God. That has come about in part because of the decision to put God first when it comes to money.

United Methodist elders are expected to lead their congregations in stewardship. As an elder I'm supposed to tithe. While years ago this was a challenge, it's easy now. This church pays their pastor a salary of \$53,511. You also provide a church owned home which is roughly valued at \$8,000 per year (that's the rental value of the parsonage). What I give back God through the ministry of the church 10% of my salary plus the value of my housing to First United Methodist church, Baraboo. I give 118/week or \$6,136/year to the church. We are a two income family. Our total pledge is more than this. It is a source of great contentment knowing I support the work of Christ in the local church.

This week you'll be getting a letter from me, with an estimate of giving card for 2018. You are asked to prayerfully consider what you will give back to God through the ministry of the church in 2018, and return the card on November 26 in worship, or mail it back by November 28th. As your pastor, I have no control over what you put on your estimate of giving card. That's as it should be. It's a matter between you and God alone. But what you decide to give back to God through the ministry of the church is not just a matter of personal choice. It is an expression of your faith.

When you get that letter, you may struggle to figure out what to put on your estimate of giving card, Here's a suggestion -- just a suggestion. Go back and estimate what you have spent in the last year on things you didn't need: not rent, food, clothing, insurance -- not the necessities but the non-essentials. The little and big things you haven't needed but that added to your quality of life: vacation -- theater tickets -- eating out -- sporting events -- what you spend on Mt. Dew or Dr. Pepper or going to the Coffee Bean. For some people that will include airline travel, the cost of maintaining a vacation home. Add all those things together and come up with an estimate what you've spent in a year on non-essentials. And then put that amount next to what you've given to God through the ministry of the church in the last year. Compare these two dollar amounts. Then ask

yourself: would God be pleased by two numbers? If not, what would you need to do, to make your giving to God through the ministry of the church an expression of how much God means to you?

When will Aaron Rodgers leave professional football? When will enough be enough for him? However you answer that “fill in the blank” question: ‘when I have enough _____ I’ll be content’ -- the question will still be there? When is enough, enough? Will we ever totally overcome ‘restless heart syndrome?’ Maybe not. But here’s the good news in all of this: contentment is possible. Contentment comes from a relationship with God. Money is a tool to create a God-centered life. It’s not getting more money that gives us contentment but giving to God first: that brings contentment. Jesus talked so much about money because he knew that giving money is a primary way we put God first. He challenged people to grow in their use of money as a way of growing in their faith. I never would have started tithing if I hadn’t been challenged. I challenge you to try it. Don’t try it because the church needs your money. Try it as a vehicle for finding more contentment. We all need to find ways to put God first. It’s our relationship with God – and our relationships of love with other people – these are the source of true contentment.

To help you find contentment, as you leave you’ll be given a key tag, which you can read several times a day. It’s our prayer of dedication today: let’s read it together now. **Lord, help me be grateful for what I have, remember that I don’t need most of what I want, and that joy is found in simplicity and generosity.** May it be so. Amen.

This sermon was inspired by material from “Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity” by Adam Hamilton (Abingdon 2012).