

Contentment

Day of Thanksgiving – 11/23/23 – Mt. Calvary Luth.

Text: Philippians 4:6-20 Pastor Keith Besel

v. 11, [Paul says,] “...I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.”

Introduction

✘ Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis - a mouthful that is seldom uttered. But I think most of you know what it is: ALS for short or Lou Gehrig's disease. It's a brutal disease that causes the brain to lose control of the body's muscles. It's one of the cruel ironies of history that a disease notorious for crippling people quickly and severely should strike someone as relentless as Lou Gehrig.

→ Lou Gehrig played for the New York Yankees from 1923 until 1939 and was known as the “Iron Horse.” For nearly 60 years, he held the record for playing 2,130 consecutive games; a record that stood until 1995 when it was broken by Cal Ripken. Both his fellow players and fans loved Lou because of his tenacity and drive to play day in and day out.

→ But what was most startling, most memorable, about Lou Gehrig was his farewell speech delivered to a packed crowd at Yankee Stadium when he retired prematurely due to the onslaught of ALS. He said: “Fans, for the past two weeks, you have been reading about the bad break I got. Yet today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth.” Those words seem so foreign and unthinkable in our current culture where so many people expect life to be delivered to them pristine and unblemished on a silver platter. Multimillionaire athletes refuse to honor their own name that they signed to a contract, choosing instead to hold out rather than play for less than what they want to be paid.

✘ But it's not just athletes. It's all of us. It's you and it's me. The words have passed through your lips or at least crossed through your mind: “I deserve better than this.” What a contrast to the words of Lou Gehrig – a man who publically expressed great contentment in spite of the difficulty he faced in life.

I. Contentment – not in stoicism or comparison

✘ It does make one wonder, “How can someone be so content when his/her world seems to be crumbling around them?” This should not be confused with the common response to difficulty when we say that someone is being stoic in the face of adversity. That is to keep your inner struggles or pain to yourself while portraying a calm and content demeanor on the outside. We all know those people who never seem to let anything get to them. But often, nothing gets to them because they have shut themselves off from all things outside themselves.

→ But stoicism, dear friends, is not the same as contentment. Because, just as the stoics won't let troubles get them down, they won't let joy bring them delight. These people – maybe this actually describes some of us here this morning, have constructed a cold, empty life for themselves. They have worked so hard to protect themselves from acknowledging and dealing properly with the pain of turmoil, that they have robbed themselves of life's beauty and joy as well.

→ And it is a more common tactic than you may think. Take for example that person who is always getting on your nerves. Now you have vowed to yourself that you will not react in the least to his callous and hurtful remarks at the family Thanksgiving dinner (or some other time that you see him). But what happens? In the process, you become cold, not only toward that one person but toward everyone else to the point that now you refuse to accept any well-intended advice from those who are close to you. You even refuse to rejoice in the

accomplishment of another friend because you won't dare let someone else have that much place in your life again.

- ✘ Friends, that's not how you find contentment in the middle of these dark times, unless you are willing to buy into the false belief that God is the One to blame for "creating this bleak, ugly, and pointless world." No, stoicism is not the answer to contentment.
- ✘ Other people pursue a different approach; trying to content themselves by finding someone who is worse off than they are. I've heard this one more times than I can count, "At least I'm not in his/her shoes."
 - ➔ I read about a pastor who tried this tactic when he was still in college. Every Friday he got together with a group of buddies to play basketball. And while it was a great time of camaraderie, there was a problem – he wasn't a particularly gifted athlete. In basketball, they talk about a player having soft hands – that is being able to absorb the ball as it comes to you in a pass. Well, his hands – as mine were in football – seemed to be made of stone, because passes would bounce right off his hands and go out of bounds. One Friday as he was walking back to his dorm room, beating himself up over his poor play; having a bit of pity party on his own, he saw Amy who lived across the hall. She had no legs and would walk to and from class on her hands, using flip-flops to protect her palms. Other days she would use a motorized cart to get around campus. Well, he saw Amy and he told himself to stop complaining because "at least he had legs so he could play basketball."
- ✘ While there is some wisdom in that insight – that also is not how you find contentment. Spending life in a constant search for someone to pity more than yourself – that will more likely leave you discontented because your focus will be on life's tragedies, rather than its beauty. And you'll rob yourself of enjoying the company of some of the most remarkable people around because you will have reduced them to objects of pity rather than embracing the unique person created by God and loved by God as they possess an abundance of His grace and beauty. So, comparison is not the way to contentment either.

II. Paul's Contentment – in prison and suffering

- ✘ In his letter to the Christians at Philippi, we see that Paul teaches us the true means for finding contentment. As we've been studying this letter in our Sunday morning Bible Class, we've come to more fully appreciate his teaching because of the conditions he was in at the time. Paul wrote this letter while he was in prison for the sake of the Gospel. In fact, Paul spent roughly one quarter of his missionary career in prison. And while none of us would ever want to be incarcerated today, what Paul likely endured makes our prisons look like the Ritz-Carlton. Consider these words from historian John McRay:

Roman imprisonment was preceded by being stripped naked and then flogged – a humiliating, painful, and bloody ordeal. The bleeding wounds went untreated as prisoners sat in painful leg or wrist chains. Mutilated, bloodstained clothing was not replaced even in the cold of winter. Most cells were dark, especially the inner cells of a prison, like the one Paul and Silas inhabited in Philippi. Unbearable cold, lack of water, cramped quarters, and sickening stench from few toilets made sleeping difficult and waking hours miserable. ... Because of the miserable conditions, many prisoners begged for a speedy death. Others simply committed suicide. (John McRay, "Stench, Pain, and Misery: Life in a Roman Prison," *Christian History* 47 [1995]: 14)

- ✘ Whether Paul was in this kind of prison for an extended period or even if it was for a short period of time before going into a more comfortable form of house arrest as some suggest, his status at the time that he wrote these words in our text today were far from ideal. And...he did nothing to deserve this treatment. His "crime" was to proclaim the love of God in Christ. There are plenty

of prisoners around him who are longing for an early death, but not Paul. Instead he says in verses 11-13, "I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me."

→ "Plenty and hunger, abundance and need." That's the stark contrast between our situation today and Paul's, isn't it? After our service this morning, many of us will return home, or maybe go to some family member's or friend's home and soon face a feast of turkey and stuffing, side dishes and desserts galore. And if you're given to social media, you might take a picture of your loved ones around the dining room table with the Thanksgiving spread and post it with the caption #LifelsGood. Paul had none of that! If social media existed in his day, he might have posted a picture of himself in the squalor of a Roman prison, or surrounded by gruff guards with the caption #Content.

III. Contentment – delivered by Christ

✘ So the question still stands, "How can Paul be so content?" He tells us in verses 7 and 13 that the secret to his contentment is Jesus Christ. As long as your attention is focused on yourself folks, you will never find true contentment. This is what Martin Luther called belly-button gazing. Okay, his actual language for it was that you are "turned in on yourself". Staring at your navel or looking at your life in a mirror will not lead to contentment. Even worse, fixing our eyes on others and their lives in comparison to our own – that's the very death of contentment. So as much as you and I are looking forward to it, that feast spread before you and your family later today; even the opportunity to spend time with the ones you love – none of that will bring true contentment either.

→ But fixing your eyes on Jesus: that brings us contentment even in the darkest of times. Paul says it like this; "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me" (v. 13). You see, he has no delusions of grandeur; no thought that Jesus will make all of his troubles just disappear so that his dank, cold prison cell will all of sudden become an oasis. In fact, Paul anticipates ongoing suffering and even death at the hands of the enemies of Christ. Yet he knows that none of that – no matter how bad it gets, can ever rob him of his life with Jesus.

→ Paul can do all things through Christ because Jesus is the one who gives Paul the strength to face the worst that suffering and Satan and any and all enemies can bring his way. And certainly death cannot rob Paul of Christ. Verse 18, "I have received full payment, and more," he says. That's the completed action and gift of his eternal salvation in Jesus. Paul is content in all circumstances because his contentment is grounded not in his circumstances, but in Jesus. And so is yours.

✘ I realize, in fact, that some of you are not going home to the feast that you desire today. Some of us won't be blessed by the fellowship of family that we've enjoyed in the past. Death has parted us from loved ones. Family strife or geographical distance has robbed us of sharing today's holiday meal. But take heart, because absolute contentment is still yours in Jesus Christ.

→ Nothing – nothing at all my dear Christians can rob you of Christ. That doesn't mean it's easy though on this holiday or on any other day. Paul didn't have it easy in prison and none of us has it easy in this sin-drenched world and life that we live. But here's the deal: you don't ever bear it alone! Jesus is with you to shoulder the burden. He has already carried your biggest burden to His cross – your sin and all of its guilt! And He has risen triumphant from the grave, victorious over it all! So yes, just as Paul could say it, so can you every single day, "I can do all things through Him who strengthens me."

✘ Let's say you are not going to be with loved ones at a feast today, Jesus' promise never goes away: the Day is coming when He will bring you to a glorious eternal feast before the very throne of God! And if you are feasting today, that same promise from Jesus will make your feast today look like a measly crumb in comparison. For His is a banquet table spread for all believers of all time; a never ending feast where both your plate and your cup overflows with His bounty and blessing! That is contentment.

→ And if death has separated you from someone special, take comfort in knowing that you are not alone. Jesus and His strength and comfort is forever with you. If some division keeps you from sitting at a table with your parent, child, spouse, sibling, or friend, Paul assures you in verse seven that Jesus brings you God's perfect peace; the peace that "surpasses all (human) understanding" because the sin that divided you from the Father, that has been repaired forever by His cross. That's true contentment.

→ Indeed, the Day is coming when all our human divisions will be overcome by Christ as we are perfectly united with Him and by Him at the resurrection of all flesh.

Conclusion

✘ Until that great Day, Jesus sustains you and me and all of us as Christian believers, as Paul says in verse six, "by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving", as well as His gifts of Word and Sacrament and in the fellowship of His One, Holy Christian Church. Of this we can be certain, as Paul assures you in verse 19, "My God will supply every need of yours according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus". This...this is the secret to Paul's contentment and yours as well.

→ Christ Brings You Contentment Because in Him You Have It All. Amen.

"And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus" (v. 7). Amen.