

## “Cultivating Contentment”

Rev. Jayneann McIntosh, Lead Pastor  
Wausau First United Methodist Church, Wisconsin  
October 22, 2017

Keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have; for he has said, “I will never leave you or forsake you.” So we can say with confidence, “The Lord is my helper; I will not be afraid.” *Hebrews 13:5-6*

And [Jesus] said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” *Luke 12:15*

Whatever my eyes desired I did not keep from them; I kept my heart from no pleasure. . . . Then I considered all that my hands had done and the toil I had spent in doing it, and again, all was vanity and a chasing after wind. *Ecclesiastes 2:10-11*

In Wisconsin one learns about tornadoes. Kellyn was six when we got our cats. After that, a perennial summertime question was, “What about the cats? How do we make sure they’re safe?” We put the pet carrier under the basement steps, and I’d answer, “You’ll grab one; I’ll get the other.” Kellyn knew what was important to her.

When interviewed after storms, Andrew had saved his pillow. Sherry saved books and photos. Angel saved his saxophone. What would you save?

Natural disasters remind us that everything is temporary. We learn to say with Jesus, “My life does not consist of the abundance of my possessions.” Yet everywhere we turn, messages bombard us, saying it’s the other way around – that our lives’re about our possessions. Our hearts are pulled both ways.

Do you know about restless leg syndrome (RLS)? It causes an irresistible urge to move your legs. Restless heart syndrome (RHS) works similarly but it’s in the center of our being. Its primary symptom is discontent. Left unchecked, RHS can destroy us.

God creates us to be discontent about certain things and content with others. The problem is we get these backwards. We’re discontent about things we should be content about and content with things we ought to be discontent with. We’re created to know discontent in our spiritual life, which keeps us growing. We’re meant to yearn to know God more, and then grow in grace and wisdom.

The problem is we’ve become content with how much we seek justice and with our level of holiness, content with how much we love our neighbor and God. We’re content with the very things that are supposed to fill our time and attention.

Still, we’re discontent. We grumble about our jobs. We ask why we didn’t notice the leaky roof before buying the house. We complain that Suzy’s folks don’t give her a curfew. Or that our spouse is so difficult. We know that nothing’s ever going to be perfect. But is it good to compare our job to our dream job? Or to concentrate on the imperfections of our children, our partners, or folks at church. Focusing on what bothers us is crazy-making.

Today I offer four suggestions for cultivating contentment in our lives.

The apostle Paul offers a great example of contentment: “I have learned how to be content in any circumstance. I know the experience of being in need and of having more than enough; I’ve learned the secret to being content in any and every circumstance, whether full or hungry or whether having plenty or being poor.” (Philippians 4:11-12). Before you assume things are going well for Paul, he’s sitting in prison, waiting to learn whether or not he’ll be executed.

Like Paul, we can learn to be content in any circumstances. The first way to cultivate contentment is to remember that things could be worse. When the challenges at work seem overwhelming, then you go home and face mountains of work there and too much family drama, it could be worse. Look for the good. Working with teenagers can sometimes seem like herding cats. He’s mouthy. He never cleans up after himself. Is he really that forgetful or is he just ignoring me? Yet, he’s so compassionate and creative. He dotes on his little sister. ... When your kids or your parents or your spouse frustrate and disappoint you, say, “It could be worse.” Say it out loud. It could be worse. Write it down. It could be worse. Choose to look for the good. Choose to recognize that no matter who or what is aggravating you, you can still find something good.

The second way to cultivate contentment is to ask yourself, “How long will this make me happy?” We buy things we think will make us happy but we haven’t even recycled the packaging, and the luster is gone. How long will this make you happy?

Three. Develop a grateful heart. This is so important. Gratitude is vital if we’re going to be content. Practice recognizing that life – all by itself – is a gift.

Number 4. Ask yourself, “Where does my soul find true satisfaction?” Our culture tells us we find satisfaction in luxury, ease and money. Our faith answers differently. The psalmist writes,

“O God, you are my God, I seek you,  
my soul thirsts for you; ...  
My soul is satisfied as with a rich feast,  
and my mouth praises you with joyful lips  
when I think of you on my bed,  
and meditate on you in the watches of the night.”

Within each of us is a longing to connect with one who is greater than ourselves. We long to believe that our lives have meaning and that we are loved unconditionally. Jesus says the most important law is to love God with our whole being and our neighbor as ourselves. When we keep this as our guide, we find deep satisfaction and contentment.

Besides cultivating contentment, we need to cultivate simplicity. The two go together.

I’ve noticed that I feel stressed when I’m over-extended. I start to feel like a hamster on a wheel, running and running but never getting anywhere. I’m exhausted with nothing to show for it. Simplifying helps to center me.

As people of faith, knowing the true source of satisfaction, we can accept that less is more. We need to make a conscious decision to step off that hamster wheel. Here are five ways I’ve tried and found helpful.

First, set tangible goals to reduce your consumption and live below your means. This could be any number of things. Reduce the amount you trash and recycle. Use canvas bags when you’re shopping or go without. When making a purchase, buy something slightly smaller or less

resource hungry than you used to. Reduce your utilities by setting your thermostat back a few degrees, at least at night.

Second, ask, “Do I really need this?” and, “Why do I want it?” before buying to determine our true motivation. Is it a need, a self-esteem issue or something else? You may find yourself wrestling with your true motive and discover that your reason isn't a good one. I read of a student who if they don't have what he wanted at the electronics store, still felt obligated to buy something. Can you relate?

Number 3 is to use things up before buying new ones. Take care of what you buy and use things 'til they're worn out, used up or broken. Buy items that are made to last; and choose wisely when buying something with a short lifespan.

Along with this, know what's important to you. For me, natural fibers and warmth are essential in clothing. Great electronics aren't important, but making sure my coffee and chocolate purchases allow growers to earn a living wage is.

Four. Plan low-cost entertainment that enriches. When hanging out with friends or family, plan simple and cheap. A video at home with popcorn can be more fun than going out, 'cause no one will complain when you shout out call lines or laugh too much.

Five. Ask yourself, “Are there major changes that would allow me to simplify my life?” Living beyond our means is bad for our health. Sell that car and buy one you can pay for in full. Downsize your home. Get rid of the memberships or subscriptions you don't use. Ask yourself the hard questions – about home, job, and possessions. Identify a significant change that will simplify your life, yet leave you more joyful. Remember that you cannot be all God is calling you to be when you're weighed down.

Simplifying our lives requires us to practice self-control. In Proverbs we read, “Like a city breached, without walls, is one who lacks self-control” (25:28). Without walls, the city's unprotected. An enemy can come right in. Similarly, self-control is a wall that protects our inner selves from ourselves and from temptation.

Self-control is about making choices between an impulse to gain instant gratification or not acting on it – for some higher cause or greater gratification later. Self-control forgoes immediate pleasure long enough to think, “What are the long-term consequences of doing this? ... Is there a higher good or better outcome if I do this differently? ... Will this action honor God?”

Will you choose to live in **discontentment** or **contentment**? The worship design team and I talked about pitching a tent up here on the chancel. I really meant to do it, but the idea got away from me. Still, which tent will you live in – **discontentment** or **contentment**? Only you can choose which tents will be yours – by the way you live your life. If you decide that life does not consist of the abundance of your possessions, then you're choosing contentment.

Choosing contentment means we look to God as our source, giving thanks for what we have. It means we ask God to give us a right perspective on money, possessions and relationships, and to change our hearts each day. We decide to live more simply and more generously. We reclaim the joy God offers us.

---

This sermon is based on chapter 3 of Adam Hamilton's book *Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity*, 53-73, as well as sermon helps in the *Stewardship Program Guide* by the same name, 78-83.