

“Struggle Or Gift?”
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Jeremiah 4:11-12, 22-28; Luke 15:1-10
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There is a story that's told about a young minister going to her first parish. She stands up in the pulpit her first Sunday and delivers a not brilliant, but credible, sermon on kindness. The congregation nods its collective heads in approval until the next Sunday when the minister steps into the pulpit again and preaches exactly the same sermon. Now the congregation is puzzled. But they make excuses for her. She's new, getting to know people, moving in: maybe she didn't have time to prepare a new sermon. So they wait until the next week, when she gets up into the pulpit and, yes, preaches the exact same sermon again. Well, you can imagine the chatter in the parking lot that morning where it was finally unofficially decided that the Moderator would talk to the minister. So the Moderator made an appointment to come see the minister, sat down in her office, and explained, "Pastor, that was a fine sermon you've preached the past three Sundays, a fine sermon. But when are you going to give us a new one?" "Well," answered the minister, "when are you going to start doing what I told you to do in the first one!"

There is a lot of repetition in preaching. It's really not that complicated in many circumstances to know what Jesus wants us to want, or how God would have us live. Justice, kindness, and humility, counseled the prophet Micah in the hymn we just sung. Live your lives content, admonishes Paul in our scripture reading from 1st Timothy. If you have food enough and clothing, what more do you need? Paul continues, "the love of money is the root of all evil..." which is, I suspect, a little bit of hyperbole, even for Paul. But he has a point. The love of the money is the root of a lot of evil, and restlessness, and discontent. And we know that. Just as we know that we should be content with less. We know that the things we can buy with money "the stuff, even really wonderful stuff like new cars, and the newest computer, and big screen TVs and another great outfit from Nordstrom" we know that if these things do indeed buy happiness, the happiness they buy is at best shallow and short lived. There's always going to be a cooler car, a newer, faster computer, a better TV, a new fashion year coming along "and you have just invested time, desire, and money into what" well, not very much that means very much for long.

And you all know that. Right? We all know at one level that people are more important than things, that money does not make for contentment, that we, especially we Americans, we burden not only ourselves but also the whole world with our lust for stuff, and therefore the money to buy stuff. We are stripping the earth's resources, consuming this, that, and the other, and for what reason?

How many of you have seen the art exhibit at the Portland airport: a photojournalist who went all over the world, taking pictures of families with everything they own spread out on the ground, usually in front of their dwelling place. The pictures are all positive in the sense that all who consented to be photographed with their stuff, stand beside their collection of things with great pride—great pride when it is one change of clothes, two cups, three unmatched bowls of various sizes, a hand made pallet on which to sleep, an oil lamp, a few kitchen implements and an ax; great pride when it is a house, three cars, a boat, the furnishings of a four-bedroom house, and more; great pride for everything in between. How much is enough is so

driven by culture. In most of western culture, particularly our culture, the how much is out of control. I would guess that almost every person here agrees with that in principle, just as most of us believe that God wants us to live more lightly on the earth; to consume less; to be more thoughtful about how we live our lives and what we choose to possess. None of this is new to us.

So, why is it, do you think, that even knowing, as we do, that acquiring money so as to spend it on stuff does not buy deep happiness, and knowing as well that God wants us to live more caringly "which also means more sparingly" on the earth, even knowing all this, why do we still continue in our largely unreformed ways? How many weeks would I have to preach this sermon before all of you, and me as well, made significant change to our behaviors, changed as much as we would like to change. I'm afraid it would be a long time.

There is great gain in godliness with contentment, teaches Paul, as he begins his diatribe on love of money and the road to perdition. I think it's important to notice briefly here "because it could really be a whole other sermon" Paul does not say that money itself is the root of all evil, but the love of money, the desire for more and more and more, that can lead us away from faith, away from God, from our best selves. And the antidote to that corrupted and corrupting love is contentment. Interesting. Contentment is not a word we hear a lot these days, but I believe Paul has it right. Because what's important to understand about contentment is that it's not a state we reach when we have achieved or acquired something in particular; contentment is, instead, a spiritual discipline that views the world, wherever we are in it, from a perspective of awareness and thanksgiving. In other words contentment comes from what's inside us, not that which is exterior.

Contentment begins with awareness, what the Buddhists call mindfulness. How much do we pay attention to the ordinary gifts and pleasures of our lives: the human interactions with family and friends that ground us and support us, the beautiful landscapes of the Willamette Valley around us every day, the opportunity for both work and leisure, even the simple pleasure of the taste of a summer tomato? There is so much good in our lives that we are almost blind to, we take it so much for granted. And because we are blind to it, we don't let it fill us up; we don't consider our daily blessings when we hunger for what is good. The first movement of the spiritual discipline of contentment is just to pay attention to the daily graces of life, really pay attention to what we have, to do that every day, more than once a day-rest in the moment mindful of all that you take for granted that is good.

And when we pay attention, we move naturally to the second movement which is to remember to be thankful for what is, to let those ordinary daily gifts feed our hunger for more, for satisfaction. We all know the experience of having something terrible happen to someone close to us. It gives us a jolt. It reminds us forcefully of how blessed our lives really are. For that moment, we could care less about money or acquiring or consuming anything. We see and we appreciate the value of what we have. We are content. The challenge is to sustain that level of awareness and thanksgiving.

Which is why the cultivation of contentment is a spiritual discipline. It is a discipline like exercising, or learning to play an instrument, or prayer for that matter. You can't learn it overnight. You have to keep practicing consciously day after day. Am I living my life aware today? Am I living my life thankful today? The more you do it, the better you will become at it.

But it's worth the effort. Because I don't know any other sustainable way to change our hearts, to channel our wanting away from the culture's clamor, to make us not care so much how many people are richer than we are, or who has a new car, or whether a new computer would give us clearer graphics for our gaming. If we cultivate the inward grace of contentment, then the noise disappears or, at least, is muted to an indistinct background hum. And I don't know about the rest of you, but I have struggled for probably two decades to live my life more simply. I have scolded myself, budgeted myself, shamed myself, limited myself, and none of it worked for more than a short while. Because it always felt like giving something up. It was about limiting, about deprivation. For me anyway, it has never been about contentment. But I have come to realize in recent years that those I most admire, those who have truly pared down their lives to a much simpler scale and live away from anyone's marketing demographic, they don't seem limited or deprived. They seem content. I used to think that simplicity bred that contentment but I had it backwards. It is the discipline of contentment that breeds simplicity. It is contentment that allows us to walk happily away from the lure of the stuff; it is the knowledge that our lives are already full enough of the most important things that makes the rest irrelevant. If we cultivate the inner discipline of contentment, we will be happier, and the struggle to live simply will become instead a blessing. And, of course, you won't have to hear this sermon again. Thanks be to God. Amen.