

Philippians 4:6-20  
“Contentment”  
Thanksgiving Eve

May the words of my mouth and meditation of my heart be pleasing in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and Redeemer. Grace, mercy and peace to you from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ.

Our text for this Thanksgiving Eve is the Epistle Lesson, Philippians 4:6-20. I'll be reading that text throughout the sermon this evening.

Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. That's a mouthful that's seldom spoken, but you know what it is. You know it as Lou Gehrig's Disease, a brutal disease to say the least, 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. Playing for the New York Yankees from 1923 to 1939, Gehrig was known as the “Iron Horse.” For nearly sixty years, he held the record of 2,130 consecutive games played, a record which was thought unbreakable until Cal Ripken broke it in 1995. Gehrig was also the first athlete to have his number retired. It's not surprising that he was loved by players and fans alike because of his tenacity and drive to play day in and day out.

But what was most memorable, about Lou Gehrig was his farewell speech, delivered to a packed house 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 in our age when too many expect life to be delivered to them pristine and unblemished on a silver platter. Multimillionaire athletes refuse to honor the contract they themselves signed, choosing instead to hold out for more money, rather than play for less than what they want to be paid.

It's not just athletes, though. It's all of us, you and me. The words have passed through your mind and your lips: “I deserve better than this.” What a contrast to the words of Lou Gehrig, in which we hear a man who's content in spite of the difficult lot he's been dealt in life.

How can someone be so content when their world is crumbling around them? How can one be so stoic in the face of adversity? We know those people who never seem to let anything get to them. But, much of the time, nothing gets to them because they've shut themselves off from everything. Just as they won't let troubles get them down, they won't let joy bring them elation. They've constructed a cold, empty life for themselves. In their attempt to protect themselves from the pain of turmoil, they've robbed themselves of life's beauty

and joy.

Maybe you've tried that before. There's that person who's always getting on your nerves. You vow you won't react in the least to their callous remarks. In the process, you become cold, not only toward them, but toward everyone, so you even refuse to accept a good piece of advice. You even refuse to rejoice with others because you won't let someone else have that high of a place in your life. That's not how you find contentment in the midst of dark times, unless you're willing to believe the falsehood that God has created a bleak, ugly, and pointless world.

Others make themselves feel better by finding somebody who's worse off than they are and saying, "At least I'm not in his shoes. At least I have it better than him. At least I'm not as bad off as he is. At least I'm not like that guy." But that's not how you find contentment, either. A relentless search for someone who's to be pitied more than you will leave you disheartened 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 because you'll have reduced them to objects of pity rather than unique persons created and loved by God

In our text from Philippians tonight, St. Paul describes the true way to find contentment. The fullness of what he's teaching hits us when we realize the conditions under which Paul wrote. Philippians is one of Paul's captivity letters. He's in prison for the sake of the Gospel, which shouldn't surprise us since he spent about a quarter of his missionary career in prison. While none of us would want to be incarcerated today, what Paul 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."

As Paul writes our text, he's in the most deplorable place, that very sort of Roman prison. He's done nothing to deserve such treatment. All he's done is proclaim Jesus' love. He's surrounded by those longing for death because of the conditions. But not Paul. Instead he writes, "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 and Paul’s. Soon after you wake up tomorrow morning, your mouth will start watering because your nose will be filled with the scent of wonderful things to eat. And before the day’s done, you’ll have enjoyed a fine meal with family or friends or some of each. If you were one who liked to post on social media, maybe you’d take a picture of your family around the dining room table with the Thanksgiving spread, and then post it with the caption #LifeIsGood. Paul has none of that. But if he’d had social media, he would have posted a picture of himself in the squalor and blood of a Roman prison with the caption #Content.

How can Paul be content? The secret to Paul’s contentment is Jesus. As long as your attention is focused on yourself, you won’t find contentment. This is what Martin Luther called belly-button gazing, as you’re turned in on yourself. Staring at your navel won’t lead to contentment. Eyes fixated on others and the things they have won’t bring you contentment, either, because comparison is the death of contentment. And eyes fixed on the food spread before you and your family tomorrow won’t bring contentment either.

But fixing your eyes on Jesus will bring contentment, even in the darkest times. Paul says he’s content because “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” Paul doesn’t have delusions of grandeur, that Jesus will make all his troubles disappear so his dank, cold prison cell will become an oasis. Paul anticipates ongoing suffering and even death at the hands of the enemies of Christ. Yet Paul knows that none of that can rob him of Jesus. Paul can do all things through Christ who strengthens him so that no matter what he faces, he’ll remain strong in Christ. Suffering can’t rob him of Jesus. Death can’t even rob Paul of Jesus. “I have received full payment, and more,” Paul says in verse 18. Paul is content in all circumstances because his contentment is grounded, not in his circumstances, but in Jesus.

And so is yours. Maybe some of you won’t wake up to the feast you desire tomorrow. Maybe some of you won’t be blessed by the fellowship of family and friends you’ve enjoyed in the past. Maybe death has parted you from loved ones, or maybe family strife and squabbles have robbed you of sharing a holiday meal. Or maybe the continuing effects of a pandemic keep you separated. Yet, even in those circumstances, contentment remains yours in Jesus.

None of that can rob you of Jesus. That doesn’t mean it’s easy—on this holiday or on any other day. Paul didn’t have it easy in prison and you don’t have it easy as you face the cross you bear. But you don’t bear it alone. Jesus is with you to shoulder your burden. He’s already carried your burden to his cross. And he’s risen triumphant from the grave, victorious over your burden. So Jesus strengthens you just as he strengthened Paul. He carries you through the bad

times. “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.”

Jesus’ strength is bound up in what he delivers to you. If you won’t be a part of a feast tomorrow, Jesus promises that the Day is coming when he will deliver an eternal feast to you. If you are feasting tomorrow, Jesus promises that the coming feast dwarfs what you’ll have tomorrow. A banquet table spread for all. That’s contentment.

If death has separated you from someone you love, you’re not alone, because Jesus dwells with you. If division prevents you from sitting at the table with a parent, child, spouse, sibling, or friend, Jesus comes to assure you that he’s brought peace between you and the Father. Sin divided you from him, but Jesus reconciled you to the Father by his cross. That’s contentment.

The Day is coming when there will be a full and perfect reunion for all those who lived and died with faith in Jesus. The Day is coming when death won’t separate us, because death, diseases, and pandemics will be destroyed. The Day is coming when all our divisions will be overcome by Jesus as we’re perfectly united with him, perfectly uniting us with one another.

Until that great Day, Jesus sustains you, giving you his perfect companionship, so you don’t lose heart. Paul writes in verse 19 of our text, “My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.” That’s what Paul means when he says, “I can do all things through him who strengthens me.” This is the secret to Paul’s contentment and yours as well. Jesus brings you contentment because in him you have it all. Amen.

And now may the peace which passes all understanding guard our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.