

Summit Presbyterian Church
Preached by Rev. Sue Cyre
11/13/11
Title: Walking with God: In Contentment
Text: 2 Cor 11:21-29; 12:7-10

What causes us to be discontent? I suspect one reason we sometimes feel discontent is that we are bored. We have so many blessings that what we have begins to bore us. There is no novelty any more. We want excitement, change, challenges.

A newspaper article described the epidemic of “boredom” in our society. The article said, “boredom is wreaking havoc on society, fueling everything from extramarital affairs and drug addiction to coronaries and car accidents.”

The article observes that boredom is a modern ailment, the word didn’t even exist in the English language until after 1750.”

Psychologist and lawyer Rex Julian Beaber says, “Boredom doesn’t get a lot of press, but it is profoundly destructive. The human brain is wired to be attracted to novelty. Very shortly after we are exposed to something, it loses its power to move us.”

Mary Catherine Bateson, a visiting professor at Harvard and daughter of anthropologist Margaret Mead, recalled her young daughter complaining that “breakfast is boring.” Bateson wondered, “Who taught her that breakfast should be uninteresting? Mr. Kellogg and Mr. Post have taught the American public that breakfast should be a thrilling meal at which things snap, crackle and pop.”

The article continues, “When left unchecked, monotony can be a menace. Scientists have linked boredom to a host of physical and social ills—including crime sprees, gambling, weakened immune systems, high blood pressure, thrill-seeking, even car accidents.”

Our world is consumed with a desire for novelty, relief from boredom. The desire for novelty isn’t necessarily wrong—it is our desire for novelty, for reaching beyond where we are, that has led to great poetry, outstanding music, and modern inventions.

Yet, I’m concerned about the direction TV is moving. Fifty years ago we were entertained by “Father Knows Best” where ordinary families solved ordinary problems, unraveled misunderstandings, and dealt with failures and disappointments. They were shows that emphasized virtue and character, dignity, responsibility and honor.

Today TV offers degrading shows like Fear Factor where men and women perform the most degrading, despicable acts to try and win money. Why is seeing another person eating grubs entertaining.

Instead of portraying marriages of committed couples raising children with patience and tenderness, TV now shows men and women choosing to marry a virtual stranger picked from a group in game-show fashion.

“Father knows Best” would not be seen even as a rerun today, because our sense of novelty, our desire to push the envelope will not tolerate such a show. It would bore us.

To relieve boredom, the sensations have to get more and more intense, outrageous, dramatic, visual, gross. What excited yesterday is boring today.

The yearning for more isn't wrong—it is built into us. Reaching beyond ourselves is normal. We've been created that way. We've been created with a desire for God—that nothing else can fill. There will always be a sense in life that we're missing something, that there is something more just beyond our grasp or around the corner.

We'll never be quite satisfied, everything will fall short—we'll keep looking for more. Yearning for fulfillment. That isn't wrong. We were created with a desire for God that hasn't yet been satisfied.

G. K. Chesterton called our discontentment ‘divine discontent.’ He reminds us in his book “Orthodoxy” that at the end of every achievement we realize, “we have come to the wrong star.” No matter how great the high—it won't last. Because that discontentment returns. We're never quite there. We've come to the wrong star. Because the discontentment is “divine discontentment.” The source is our desire for God.

If one reason for discontent is having plenty and becoming bored, another reason for discontent is adversity: pain, suffering, problems of every kind. Paul suffered. In today's text he describes his adversity. He was flogged, exposed to death, received 40 lashes minus one because it was thought that 40 lashes was a death sentence so 40 minus one brought the person within an inch of death.

He was beaten with rods, stoned, shipwrecked, lost at sea, in danger from rivers, robbers. He was in danger from Jews and false brothers—He was in danger from men who called themselves Christians and yet attacked Paul. He went without sleep; was hungry thirsty. He had been cold and naked.

Paul had every reason to be discontent. He was not only attacked for sharing the Gospel...that is biblical. Jesus said that persecution would come for sharing the Gospel. But, Paul suffers because of everything else too.... Hunger, thirst, robbers, ship wrecks.

He had some kind of thorn in the flesh that may have been migraine headaches or relationships that could not be resolved. We don't know whether the thorn was physical or spiritual or relational. Paul pleads for God to remove it and God doesn't.

Instead God's answer is, "My grace is sufficient for you, for my power is made perfect in weakness."

We sometimes think that we would be holy and close to God if only we didn't have all these problems besieging us. Then we could have quiet time without our mind racing and our heart filled with fear. We think if we didn't have the bad stuff around us, we'd be close to God as if it is the bad stuff that is keeping us from God.

Calvin writes, "Our weakness appears to be an obstacle against God's perfecting his power within us, but Paul not only denies that that is so, but asserts the opposite, that it is only when our weakness becomes apparent that God's strength can be perfected. To understand this clearly we must distinguish between God's strength and ours, for here the word MY is emphatic. Power says the LORD (that is, the power that helps men in their need, that raises them up when they have fallen and that recreates them when they faint), 'is made perfect in men's weakness'..."

In his letter to the church at Philippi, just before Paul is martyred, Paul writes, "whatever was to my profit I now consider loss for the sake of Christ. What is more, I consider everything a loss compared to the surpassing greatness of knowing Christ Jesus my Lord, for whose sake I have lost all things. I consider them rubbish, that I may gain Christ and be found in him, not having a righteousness of my own that comes from the law, but that which is through faith in Christ—the righteousness that comes from God and is by faith."

A few verses later Paul says, "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances. I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want." Are you ready, here is the answer... "I can do everything through him who gives me strength."

Are we discontent because we have so much and are bored? All the stuff is as rubbish so that we may gain Christ. The excitement, the fulfillment, the joy, the challenge, is to gain Christ. We can let go of all the stuff, all the desire for earthly stuff, through Christ who strengthens us. We can reach forward through Christ who strengthens us to gain Christ and to face every situation.

Are we discontent because we have tribulation and struggle? We can do all things through Christ who strengthens us. Everything falls away so that we can gain Christ.

What is the secret to being content in any and every situation? I can do everything through him who gives me strength." It's a person who gives us strength. A person who is with us. A person, Jesus Christ who desires that we know him and walk with him.

We have a God-created void in our lives that can never be filled by anything or anyone but God.

Max Lucado writes in his book, "Traveling Light", "When Lloyd Douglas, author of "The Robe and other novels, attended college, he lived in a boardinghouse. A retired, wheelchair-bound music professor resided on the first floor. Each morning Douglas would stick his head in the door of the teacher's apartment and ask the same questions, "Well, what's the good news?" The old man would pick up his tuning fork, tap it on the side of the wheelchair, and say, "That's middle C! It was middle C yesterday; it will be middle C tomorrow; it will be middle C a thousand years from now. The tenor upstairs sings flat. The piano across the hall is out of tune, but, my friend, that is middle C."

Middle C reorients us—everything else is calibrated in terms of Middle C. Everything else has its place defined by middle C. That's what we do in worship—we play middle C and we reorient our lives to Jesus Christ who is Middle C. It is Christ who is the One who was and is and is to come. "Jesus Christ who is the same yesterday and today, yes and forever." Jesus is the One who reminds us that we are empty without him and we will never have our desire filled until we enter glory and fully know Him.

Worship reminds us that Christ is the beginning and end of our existence. We are only complete and fulfilled in Him. The Catechism says, "What is the chief end of man." And it answers, "To glorify God and enjoy him forever."

That's what we are made for. That's what fulfills us. And that's what Christ is preparing us for. The yearnings that we experience on earth should lift our eyes heavenward. We ought to slap our side and say, "There's that yearning again. It feels like a need to buy a sports car, or go shopping, but it's not—that yearning is for the God who does not fill me yet....but will."

Are we suffering with trials. It is Christ who meets us in the midst of the trials. It is Christ who gives us himself and his strength.

Contentment is not absence of struggle. It is meeting God in the midst of the struggle. It is knowing that God is sovereign. If we are facing struggles, like Paul did, it is not because we did something wrong, although we should certainly ask God if there is some area of our lives he wants us to change. God does not bring struggle to punish us. All of God's judgments are for one purpose to continue to draw us closer to him. If we have sin that is pulling us away, yes, God will bring judgment to cut out that sin and all that keeps us from himself.

Contentment is not absence of struggle. Contentment is not when we have enough stuff. Contentment is that time when we realize God is sovereign over everything... even the bad stuff... even the earthquakes and tornados. God rules over it all. And he will use all of it, to draw us closer to himself. Contentment is when we want God more than even life itself.

Sometimes God calls us to let go of material possessions, maybe health, maybe relationships, ...everything so that we can desire God himself first and foremost.

I put the story on the back of the bulletin of Horatio Spafford, a successful Chicago lawyer, who wrote the hymn we will sing in a few minutes, "It Is Well With My Soul." The hymn wasn't written by a man who was on top of the world. It was written in the midst of great personal tragedy.

Spafford's only son was killed by scarlet fever in 1870 at the age of four. A year later Spafford lost all of his real estate in the great Chicago Fire. Devastated by all that happened to them, The Spaffords were going to go to England and help their close friend Dwight L. Moody in his evangelistic crusades.

Spafford, his wife and his 4 daughters traveled from Chicago to NYC to get the French steamer 'Ville de Havre' to cross the Atlantic. At the last minute, Horatio Spafford was delayed by business and sent his wife and daughters on ahead. He returned to Chicago. Nine days later, Spafford received a telegram from his wife that read, "saved alone."

"On November 2nd 1873, the 'Ville de Havre' had collided with 'The Lochearn', an English vessel. It sank in only 12 minutes, claiming the lives of 226 people. Anna Spafford had stood bravely on the deck, with her daughters Annie, Maggie, Bessie and Tanetta clinging desperately to her. Her last memory had been of her baby being torn violently from her arms by the force of the waters. Anna was only saved from the fate of her daughters by a plank which floated beneath her unconscious body and propped her up....

...Upon hearing the terrible news, Horatio Spafford boarded the next ship out of New York to join his bereaved wife. Bertha Spafford (the fifth daughter of Horatio and Anna born later) explained that during her father's voyage, the captain of the ship had called him to the bridge. 'A careful reckoning has been made', he said, 'and I believe we are now passing the place where the de Havre was wrecked. The water is three miles deep.' Horatio Spafford then returned to his cabin and penned the lyrics of his great hymn.

...The words which Spafford wrote that day come from 2 Kings 4:26. They echo the response of the Shunammite woman to the sudden death of her only child. Though we are told 'her soul is vexed within her', she still maintains that 'It is well.' And Spafford's song reveals a man whose trust in the Lord is as unwavering as hers was.

...No matter what circumstances overtake us may we be able to say with Horatio Spafford...

*When peace like a river, attendeth my way,
When sorrows like sea billows roll;
Whatever my lot, Thou hast taught me to say,
It is well, it is well with my soul."*

We live in a world, torn by a million desires and yearnings; a world that has everything and yet is never satisfied. A world also filled with unimaginable sorrows and struggles. Perhaps our best witness as Christians is to be contented people. People who know that the missing piece in our lives can only be found in Christ. People who know that we can be

content in any and every situation because we can do everything through Christ who gives us strength.

Lucado writes, "Since no act brought him forth, no act can take him out. Does he fear an earthquake? Does he tremble at a tornado? Hardly. Yahweh sleeps through storms and calms the winds with a word. Cancer does not trouble him, and cemeteries do not disturb him. He was here before they came. He'll be here after they are gone. He is uncaused.

.....And he is ungoverned. Counselors can comfort you in the storm, but you need a God who can still the storm. Friends can hold your hand at your deathbed, but you need a Yahweh who as defeated the grave. Philosophers can debate the meaning of life, but you need a Lord who can declare the meaning of life. You need a Yahweh. .. You need a God who, while so mind-numbingly mighty, can come in the soft of night and touch you with the tenderness of an April snow. You need a Yahweh. And you have one."

Amen