

Sermon Title: The Path to Contentment  
Scripture Text: Phil 4:10-20  
Date: May 18, 2008  
Immanuel Baptist Church  
Chuck Queen, Pastor

In Paul's final words to the Philippians he expresses his appreciation for the financial help the church at Philippi had sent him. He does not want them to be burdened about his situation though, for he informs them that he has learned to be content in all situations; whether he has plenty, or whether he is in need. After this personal reflection on his own experience and spiritual state he says to the church, "And my God—the God who taught me contentment in all circumstances and situations, the God who has seen me through all the ups and downs, the God who has given me the grace for every challenge—this God will meet all your needs according to the riches of his glory in Christ Jesus."

It seems to me that at the very heart of what Paul is saying is that "the secret of being content in any and every situation" is the capacity to trust. *The secret of being content is the capacity to trust.*

A professor of preaching at a seminary in the western part of the United States tells about a good friend that went through a three year battle of Luekemia, a battle he finally lost. The professor was visiting him one day when his friend rather excitedly said, "I've learned something." The professor asked him what he learned. He said, "I've learned that life is not like a VCR." The professor said, "What do you mean"? He said, "Well, you can't fast forward the bad parts." There was a long pause. Then he says, "But I have learned that Jesus Christ is in every frame, and right now that's just enough."

Have we learned that? That Jesus Christ is in every frame. It doesn't matter what's in the frame: a bout with the flu, a fight with our spouse, the death of a loved one, a bad day at work, the effects of chemotherapy, the betrayal of a friend, a terrible moral failure—it doesn't matter. Jesus Christ, our Lord, is in every frame. And the grace and love that comes through Jesus Christ is adequate for every situation.

Henry Nouwen writes about some trapeze artists who became his friends and he talks about the special relationship between the flyer and the catcher. As the flyer is swinging high above the crowd, the moment comes with the flyer lets go of the trapeze. The flyer arcs out into the air suspended in nothingness. It is too late to reach back for the trapeze. But, it is too soon to be grasped by the one who would catch him. The trapeze artist told Nouwen, "The flyer must never try to catch the catcher. He must wait in absolute trust. The catcher will catch him. But he must wait. His job is not to flail about in anxiety. His job is to be still." The flyer must trust that the sure hands of the catcher will at just the right time pluck him from the air. Can we trust the Catcher to catch us, to take care of us?

No one has done anything significant in the cause of Christ without exercising some measure of risky trust. John Ortburg refers to Henrietta Mears as an example of trust. She taught college age, single young people for decades at Hollywood Presbyterian Church. She became frustrated, however, with the educational materials that was being produced, so she began a little publishing enterprise out of a garage that grew into a reputable Christian publishing company. She was frustrated by not having a good single-volume introduction to the Bible that could help her students understand what it was about, so she wrote one that sold hundreds of thousands of copies. She began a retreat and conference center in the Sand Gabriel Mountains. And she did all of this in a day when many people thought a woman had no business doing such things. Time and time again she took a risky step of faith, trusting that whether she succeeded or failed, God was there to supply all the grace and strength and courage she needed.

The kind of trust that dispels fear and anxiety and leads to contentment is not mere wishful thinking, it's not blind trust, but it's not based on indisputable evidence either. Fred Craddock recalls being in Bethlehem and a Jewish man explained the Christmas story. They were standing in the Shepherd's Field and Fred says, "that if you stand down there, looking toward the city, you look up, there is a bright star, and it looks like it's standing right over the houses." The man told Craddock that's what happened at Christmas—that's how the people got confused and thought there was a star over the house where Jesus was. When he finished Fred said, "Well, that's one way to look at it." Then, said Fred, his friend said something very interesting. He said, "I know that's just one way to look at it. When I was in school, the rabbi explained everything in the Bible two different ways, and his reason was this: If something happens and you can't explain it is another way, then God didn't do it." Fred says, "That's not bad. God does not paint you into a corner and say, "Now, you weasel, you don't have a choice, believe." We always have a choice.

While the reasons for believing may be credible, they are not infallible. Even when we utilize all our resources of common sense, thoughtful research and study, reason and good judgment, the wisdom and discernment of others—we do not have indisputable proof. At some point we have to step out in trust.

*The capacity to trust is directly connected to our capacity to receive and extend forgiveness. Forgiveness and trust are inseparably interconnected.*

Brennan Manning, in his book, *Ruthless Trust*, says that the biggest obstacle he faced on his journey of trust was an oppressive sense of inadequacy, inferiority, and low self-esteem. He has no memory of being held, hugged, or kissed by his mother as a little boy. His father, in his later years, became a very kind and gentle man, but in his childhood, he was never around. He was constantly trying to find work during the years of the Great Depression.

His mother had been orphaned at age three—both her parents died in the flu epidemic in Montreal. She lived in the orphanage for several years before she was adopted. At age 18 she moved to Brooklyn, New York, for training as a registered nurse. Having received little attention or affection through those early years, she was incapable of giving any.

Manning recalls one experience that affected him for many years. He writes, “One snowy night when I was six years old, my father returned home from a hard day of job-hunting and asked my mother how we boys had behaved. Pointing to my brother, Rob (fifteen months older than I), she said, “He’s incorrigible. I want you to march him down to the police station right now. Tell the cops to put him in jail and leave him there.”

And my father did just that. I knelt on the broad windowsill with my nose pressed against the glass, hoping against hope that my brother would return. Half an hour later, my father came walking up the street alone. The terror of rejection and abandonment gripped my heart. Tears rolled down my cheeks. Trembling, I realized that there was no one to protect me. I was utterly alone. I knew I would be next.

Then I saw Rob about thirty yards behind my father. He was making a snowball. The inner panic subsided a bit, though I was still scared and shaken. Wiping the tears from my eyes, I climbed down from the sill, assumed the macho position of a little-boys-don’t-cry six-year old, and pretended disinterest in a traumatic event that haunted me for years.”

But Manning goes on to say,

“One morning in prayer—I was an adult by this time—I had a vivid image of my now deceased mother at age six in the orphanage, kneeling on the windowsill, her nose pressed against the glass, tears streaming down her face as she begged God to send two nice people who would adopt her. Suddenly all the anger simmering within me at my mother, all the resentment, I had felt because she hadn’t been there for me as a child, disappeared. Sobbing, I asked her forgiveness. With a radiant smile, she said, “I may have messed up, but you turned out okay.” As she hugged and kissed me, the greatest enemy of trust in my life was disarmed.”

*When we come to trust and experience the unconditional love and forgiveness of God in the person of Jesus we are set free from our resentments, bitterness, and anger and enabled to forgive and love those who have hurt us and caused us to suffer. When we experience God unconditional forgiveness and know that we are loved, we are liberated to love and forgive others. Both the horizontal and the vertical dimensions of love and forgiveness are two sides of the same coin.*

I like what the late William Sloane Coffin says: “Of God’s love we can say two things: it is poured out universally for everyone from the Pope to the loneliest wino on the planet;

and secondly, God's love doesn't seek value, it creates value. It is not because we have value that we are loved, but because we are loved that we have value. Our value is a gift, not an achievement."

Can we trust that? That we don't have to earn value, or achieve value, that we already have value, because we are loved by God? Again Coffin says, "Faith (trust) is being grasped by the power of love. Faith is recognizing that what makes God is infinite mercy, not infinite control; not power, but love unending." The path that leads to contentment, the path that leads to the confidence that God will indeed be enough whatever our needs, is a path that takes us directly into the warm embrace of a God of amazing grace and unconditional love.

*What Paul had and what Christ brings to all of his followers is the joy and adventure of being involved in a story and a cause that is much greater than our individual, little stories. Jesus called this the kingdom of God, God's new world. We further God's kingdom when we love others and when we take care of God's creation. There is a deep sense of joy and contentment that comes from investing our life in God's cause in the world; from learning how to love.*

John Powell put it this way: "The size of a person's world is the size of his or her heart . . . People who love learn to move the focus of their attention and concern away from themselves out to others. They care deeply about others . . . This much is certain: there is no learning to live without learning to love." I would add: There is no learning to live in God's kingdom, no learning the secret of contentment and the path to peace unless we learn how to love.

It can be risky and it can be costly, and it may even plunge us into times of hardship and trial. But we were created for this purpose. This is human destiny designed by the Creator. We need a greater purpose beyond ourselves, a greater cause beyond our own personal interests and pleasures.

Like Paul, we too can learn to the secret of being content in all circumstances, by developing our capacity to trust, by letting go of the grudges and resentments we have accumulated against others, and by joining God's project for redeeming the world, making the world a global community of compassion, fairness, and fullness of life for all people.

Gracious God, reveal your love to us, so that we might be free of our fears and worries and anxieties, so that we might be real and authentic and honest with you and others. Increase our capacity to trust you and to follow the way of love embodied and lived out in this world by Jesus, our Lord. May your Spirit work in our lives so that your love and forgiveness is not just something we know in our heads, but feel in our hearts. Then we too can become agents of your love in our families, in our workplaces, in our communities, in our church—with whoever and wherever our lives touch down. Amen.