

St. Matthew's Lutheran Church & School – Oconomowoc, WI  
Twenty-first Sunday after Pentecost – Year A  
Philippians 4:4-13  
October 25, 2020

**Sermon: Philippians 4:4-13**

**Rejoice in the Lord as Stewards of His Gifts: Contentedly Employing Your Time and Talents for Others**

Are you content? Are you content with life, with your career, with where you have been, with the direction things are headed, with what you have? Are you content? Maybe you find yourself saying, “Well, I think so. I look at the way God has blessed me and what he has given me in my life, and I have to say that, yes, I am content. God has been good to me.” So, if we are so content, what does it take to make that contentment disappear like the sun over the horizon in the evening? Let's think about a little exercise for a moment. If I had a cake in the front of church and I invited four children to come to the front and get a piece of cake. One side is chocolate and one side is vanilla so no matter what you like I have it and of course the cake is piled high with rich, creamy, decadent frosting to give the children a sugar high to send them home with and it will last well into the afternoon/evening. I tell the children, “Come on up and you are all going to get a piece of cake.” And the children are excited. Their eyes are locked on the mountains of sugary frosting supported by the moist cake foundation underneath and imagining how sweet it will taste. At this point it's just pure joy. They are all happy because they are getting cake. I take the knife and begin to slice the cake into four pieces, one for each child. As I am cutting the pieces one child quickly alerts the group to the reality of my lack of cake cutting skills. While cutting the cake I cut some of the pieces very large and others smaller and one piece is just a tiny sliver sorry excuse of a piece. It's just enough to give you a taste of the frosting and cake and leaving you wanting more. However, there is no need to panic yet because the pieces haven't been distributed and each child is secretly scheming in their heart that they are going to get one of the large pieces and the sorry excuse for a sliver of a piece is certainly going to be given to someone else. As I begin to hand out the pieces a little girl looks down at the tiny sliver of cake she received as tears start to well up in her eyes as she asks me through the sniffles, “Why do I get the small piece?” as she can only look on in jealousy at the others devouring their pieces that test the structural fortitude of the plate. A few moments earlier everyone was content. Everyone was happy. Everyone was getting cake. It's only after realizing that some received bigger pieces of sugar overload than others that the tears of discontent and jealousy began to flow. Contentment is a curious thing, isn't it? When focused on simply what God has given me maybe we find it easier to be content. However, when I'm tempted to peak over at what you have then maybe I'm not so sure. What's their situation? Is it better or worse than me? If worse, well, then I can count my blessings. If better, then I'm not so content and I wonder, “Why didn't I get more?”

Paul could have found himself wondering that. Quick recap of Paul's situation: He was doing what God called him to do. He was carrying out God's mission and sharing Jesus in Jerusalem and that got him arrested. He appeared before several Roman government officials, but none of them granted release for Paul. After two years he plays his only “Get Out of Jail Free Card” and appeals his case to Caesar. Paul is transported as a prisoner to Rome and awaits trial under house arrest. That's when he writes this letter to the church that he started in the city of Philippi. Paul didn't know what was going to happen. He didn't know if he was going to be released. He didn't know if he was going to remain a prisoner and for how long. He didn't know if he was going to die a prisoner. There were a lot of questions for Paul and hardly any answers.

Put yourself in Paul's imprisoned sandals. How would you react? I think it's perfectly natural to say there would be some fear. Fear of the unknown. Fear of the worst-case scenario. Fear because you don't have control over the situation. Now that you have that fear going let's mix in a bit of blame. It always feels good to blame somebody else, so who could we blame in this situation? Let's not waste time, let's go right to the top. Wouldn't you want to blame God? If you were in Paul's sandals you were doing what God asked you to do. You were being a good and faithful servant. And this is the thanks that you get for it? You are in prison for over two years and you still don't know what's going to happen. Thanks for nothing God. You don't even have to break an emotional sweat to reach those conclusions because maybe we've reached those conclusions and reactions at times in our own situations. That's how we might react.

How does Paul react to his circumstances? *“Rejoice in the Lord always. I will say it again: Rejoice! Let your gentleness be evident to all. The Lord is near. Do not be anxious about anything, but in everything, by prayer and petition, with thanksgiving, present your requests to God”* (Philippians 4:4-6). Praise, thanks, and rejoicing flow freely from the lips when I'm skippity-do-daaing because everything is going my way. When life aligns with the way you planned it and you are at the wheel with cruise control on because everything is smooth, yep, I can rejoice and I don't have to be anxious. I find myself content because I perceive that I have what I need. What about when I perceive that I don't? God, you tell us today to rejoice always and don't be anxious about anything. Those are really big words! Those are absolute words. Rejoice all the time? Never be anxious? This is where the sinful stand stands up and shouts,

“Objection!” How am I supposed to rejoice when my family is falling apart? How am I supposed to rejoice when I just lost my job and along with it financial security? How am I supposed to rejoice when I’m crushed with the back-breaking load of guilt that I’m so ashamed of I don’t even want to talk to God about it? How am I expected to not worry when I’ve reached my breaking point? How am I expected to not worry with a virus raging across the country? How am I expected to not worry and be anxious when I don’t know what tomorrow, next week, next month, or next year will bring? Rejoice always? Don’t be anxious about anything? Be content? Is this some kind of joke, God?

How can Paul say these words? We know his circumstances and they weren’t good. How does Paul say, “rejoice, always and don’t be anxious about anything”? “...for 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. I can do everything through him who gives me strength” (Philippians 4:11-12). First, I want you to notice what Paul didn’t say. Paul doesn’t say, “I am content because I’ve learned how to take control of my life and get what I want.” Paul doesn’t say, “I’m content because through life experience I’ve learned how to perfectly navigate the bumps and obstacles along the way.” Paul doesn’t say, “I’m content because God finally gave me what I needed, and he gave me just that little bit more than I needed. God finally gave me a bigger piece of cake with extra frosting in life.” A few moments ago, when we talked about all of the objections to rejoicing and not being anxious what did all of those objections focus on? The focus of all those objections is the circumstances. I can only be content if my circumstances are right. So, we search for contentment in all kinds of places in life like a hunting dog hot on the trail. We seek contentment in the circumstances of our family, career, finances, am I in the spot I want to be in life, popularity, power, and on and on searching for the next thing that will make us content. When we look for contentment from our circumstances, we will always be disappointed. So often our circumstances in life are like the weather in Wisconsin; tomorrow it’s going to be different.

Our joy and contentment as Christians do not rise and fall with the circumstances of life. Listen to what Paul said. Again, he is using words in absolute terms. Whatever the circumstance, in any and every situation, he is content. His every need is met. The secret is, “I can do everything through him who gives me strength.” Paul was content and we are content because Christ raises us above the circumstances. God says it so beautifully in our other two lessons. The full and free banquet of salvation is ours. That is what gives us a reason to rejoice even when the circumstances don’t. That gives us the reason to not be anxious about anything even when life would suggest otherwise. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.

How weak are you? How tired are you? How worn out are you? Why? Whose strength are you relying on? “It’s OK God I got this one. I can handle it. I don’t need you at the moment. Once I get things straightened out in my life then I’ll have time to take you more seriously God. Let me just lift this weight of sin, guilt, or stress myself.” Feel like you are crushed? Come and sit at the banquet of salvation where Jesus looks us in the eye and says, “I lifted that burden for you. I carried the weight of your guilt. I faced death and the devil, and I live to tell you about it. I have forgiven you and my kingdom is yours forever.” So, what do you lack? God hasn’t come up short. He hasn’t held back on you. Jesus said on the cross, “It is finished.”

You and I are content. Our needs are met in Christ. Christ has served us. So now, being fully content, how do we serve? Because I am content in Christ there is no need for me to hoard my gifts from God for selfish use. I have all that I need in Jesus. I’m not worried about not having enough. So, how can I help you and how can you help me? How can I serve you in your circumstance? How can we use our time and talents to benefit one another? Jesus has given me everything I need so I’ll gladly take the sliver of cake and give you the big piece and you would do the same for me. Amen.