

Thanksgiving Service
November 21, 2010
Amazing Grace Lutheran Church - Pastor Chip Wilke

Philippians 4:10-13

I rejoice greatly in the Lord that at last you have renewed your concern for me. Indeed, you have been concerned, but you had no opportunity to show it. I am not saying this because I am in need, 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.
(NIV)

Shhhhhh, I have a secret to tell you. I have a secret that you need to hear. I have a secret that is very important. Do you want to know what it is? Do you want to hear it? This secret is far more important than any famous recipe. It is a secret much greater than some advice on how to get out of debt, or raise your kids, or stay healthy, or make any kind of repairs. For today we learn the secret of being content. We hear about the secret of being satisfied with the blessings that have been given to us. It is most certainly true that ***“godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it” (1 Timothy 6).***

Yet, contentment is such a secret because it is a hard thing to find. It is a secret because people satisfied with what they have is not something we see much. Wouldn't you agree? What I often see is people who are very discontent. I see people who are never truly satisfied. Isn't that the way our world wants it? You live in an age where there is a constant push telling you that you will not be happy unless you have this or that. Our world preaches that you should not be satisfied until you have the most and the best - until you have it all - your way - right a way. So this is a secret, the secret of being content that needs to be heard and heard clearly by all starting with yours truly. I know my heart has many times been filled with discontent. Far too many times I have not been satisfied with what God has provided for me. So I pray, starting with myself, and including all of you, that we listen very closely. As we listen to the apostle Paul, as we listen to God's Word, may the Holy Spirit whisper in our ears and open up our hearts to hear and know the answer to the question: **What is the secret of being content?**

There are several threads that run through this letter we call Philippians. The most well known theme of this short letter is that of joy - which is pretty amazing considering the circumstances. Paul writes this letter bursting with joy from house arrest in Rome. Paul is a prisoner waiting to make his defense at trial. But this letter is just filled with joy and reasons for rejoicing. Another theme that runs throughout is that of thanksgiving. Read through and count how many times Paul gives thanks or encourages others to turn to God with thanksgiving. And then there is the theme throughout that is our focus this morning and that is the attitude of contentment. No matter what he had or did not have, no matter what his circumstance Paul says: ***“I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation.”***

Isn't that a secret you would like to know? How great that would be to be able to rejoice and give thanks, to feel happy and satisfied, at all times and in every circumstance! What is this secret? Paul mentions something that gave him great joy.

This causes Paul to write here: ***“I rejoice greatly in the Lord.”*** Why? The church in Philippi was able to show their concern for Paul by providing generous gifts carried to Paul by a man named Epaphroditus. It sounds like he brought Paul some much needed stuff. Whether it was food or clothes or money, or all of that and more, we are not told. We are told that it was hard to get it to him and it was delayed in coming. Whether it was because of their own poverty in Philippi or not having a way to get it to him or whatever the obstacles, they now were able to show their love and concern for Paul with generous gifts.

Is this the secret, Paul’s secret of being content? Is it having stuff, being well supplied with food and clothes and whatever else, that kept Paul satisfied? Paul quickly shoots holes in this theory. While Paul was certainly thankful for these gifts and rightly thanks the Lord and his fellow Christians for them, Paul makes it clear this was not what made him content. ***“I am not saying this because I am in need, 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...whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or in want.”*** Paul was content even when he was without basic blessings such as food - there were times when Paul suffered without it. Then there were also times when Paul had way more than he needed. It was never about earthly stuff for Paul - that is not the secret of being content.

If it is not about having a whole bunch of things, about being well fed and dressed, then what is the secret? Far more important than stuff to Paul was the relationships he shared. It is very evident how much relationships meant to the apostle. In his introduction to the Christians in Philippi Paul states: ***“I thank my God every time I remember you.”*** His letters are filled with constant thanks for the people he knew and for his fellow believers in Christ. They were his family and friends and they meant the world to him. He longed for their love and companionship. At Paul’s second defense in Rome, when things were not looking too favorable, Paul tells Timothy to come to him quickly. He encourages others to come including Mark to see him. He wanted his brothers and sisters in Christ to be near. Is this Paul’s secret to being content? Will you be truly happy if you are constantly surrounded by family and friends that love and care for you? Are these earthly relationships the secret of being content?

They weren’t for Paul. In fact, as much joy that these relationships brought to the apostle, they were also a source of sadness and disappointment. There are many examples in Paul’s letters. He talks about a man named Demas who deserted him because he loved the world. He writes about another guy, Alexander, who somehow did great harm to him. He writes how in his second defense no one came to his aide and spoke on his behalf. He laments over how later, when the going got tough and his circumstances changed for the worse, everyone, with the exception of the good doctor Luke, left him. People at times hurt Paul, even those close to him. So these relationships are not his secret to being content either!

So what is the secret of being content? If it is not things and having a whole bunch of stuff, if it is not even family or friends, what is it? Did you catch it in our verses? ***“I can do everything through him who gives me strength.”*** There was one and one alone who empowered Paul. There was one who gave Paul the strength he needed in any and every circumstance of life. There was one who made Paul happy no matter what his situation. There was one who satisfied. There was one Paul could always count on -

one who would never leave him. There is one who is the secret of being content. Simply put, Paul was content in Christ. As long as Paul had Jesus, he had everything that he needed and more.

Listen to this theme throughout this letter. ***“For to me, to live is Christ and to die is gain.”*** As long as Paul had Jesus who became obedient to death, even death on the cross to pay for all of his sins, it didn't even matter if Paul lived or died - both were a victory for him. ***“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.”*** As long as Paul had Jesus and lived by faith in Christ, Paul knew he had the holiness he needed live with God the Father and to stand before God. That was worth more to him than everything else put together. ***“Their mind is on earthly things. But our citizenship is in heaven. And we eagerly await a Savior from there, the Lord Jesus Christ, who, by the power that enables him to bring everything under his control, will transform our lowly bodies so that they will be like his glorious body.”*** Paul was content because his mind was not on earthly things but his home was in heaven. Jesus' resurrection assured Paul that he could look forward to the day when he would be given a perfect body to live there forever. The question really is: how could Paul not be content?

The picture I use that I feel illustrates what being content is all about is that of a baby who has just been fed. Maybe you have recently seen this or maybe not so recently. But if you have you know what I am talking about. The baby just gets done with the bottle and is kind of half asleep with milk running down the cheeks. The baby smiles and gives a look like: ***“life is sure good - I have everything that I need.”***

Isn't this the contentment we can have in Christ? The secret of being content is found in Jesus and what Jesus has done. We have it all in the love of Christ who became obedient to death, even death on a cross for you - to pay the price of your discontent - to pay the price of your ingratitude - to pay the price of your sin. Jesus' resurrection assures us of everything we need for life eternal. Jesus gives us joy and a reason to rejoice in every and any situation. Jesus truly satisfies and gives us all we need.

Around Thanksgiving we are always told to count all our blessings. As I was doing that this week I took another approach. I tried to think about all the things I could live without. Don't get me wrong I am thankful and enjoy all my physical blessings. I am also truly thankful for the relationships God has given me - a loving family, good friends, a wonderful church family. But really when it comes right down to it there was only one thing and one thing alone I can not do without - Jesus. Without Christ I would be lost forever. Without Jesus I would really have nothing. That is the wonderful secret my friends. It is time to let it out of the bag - to make it clear with our words and lives! It is time to let everyone know the secret of being content. As Paul confidently reminds us all: ***“And my God will meet all your needs according to his glorious riches in Christ Jesus. To our God and Father be glory for ever and ever. Amen.”***

