

Are You Happy? (Philippians 4:10-13)

Our scripture reading for today speaks to us of contentment, or happiness. When I was preparing for this sermon, I was reminded of a "Peanuts" cartoon which I saw some time ago. In it, Lucy asks Charlie Brown if he has ever known anybody who was really happy. Before she can finish her sentence, however, Snoopy comes dancing on tip-toe into the frame, his nose high in the air. He dances and bounces his way across two frames of the cartoon strip. Finally, in the last frame, Lucy finishes her sentence: "Have you ever known anybody who was really happy--and was still in their right mind?"

In our text for the day, Philippians 4:10-13, it seems, at first glance, that Paul was really happy and was in his right mind. But then we discover that Paul wrote Philippians when he was in prison! Can one really be content or happy in prison? Maybe Paul wasn't in his right mind after all, right? But, no, I believe Paul very much had his wits about him. I think that anyone who has carefully read Philippians would agree that Paul was definitely in his right mind when he wrote it.

Being in prison and being content or happy does not make Paul "nuts." But, Paul being in prison does explain two things to me. It explains why the Philippian community was concerned about Paul, and it also explains why they did not have the opportunity to show their concern for him. After all, he was away from them. He was locked behind bars.

But from behind those bars, Paul wrote to them not a crazy thing but an amazing thing. Paul wrote that he did not want them to think that he was in need of their concern, for he had learned to be content or happy with whatever he had. That's truly amazing! He had discovered how to be content or happy no matter what.

Paul said, "I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances, I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need" (Philippians 4:11b-12).

Amazing. Paul learned how to be content or happy with whatever he had. He learned how to be happy even when he had little. He learned how to be happy when he had plenty. Paul learned to be happy no matter what the circumstances were.

I am reminded of the story of a "teen-age boy who told his parents that he was going to run away from home (to find happiness). 'Listen,' he said, 'I'm leaving home. There is nothing you can do to stop me. I want excitement, adventure, beautiful women, money, and fun. I'll never find it here. So I'm leaving. Just don't try to stop me!' As he headed for the door, his father leaped up and ran toward him. 'Dad,' the boy said firmly, 'you heard what I said. Don't try to stop me. I'm going!' 'Who's trying to stop you?' answered the father, 'I'm going with you!'"

It seems like in our day and age, we are never happy. If we have a little, we're wondering how we are going to pay this month's rent, whether we will have enough money for food, whether we'll have enough money to support our children and get them into the school or college they want to attend, and if we have enough for our futures.

If we have plenty, we aren't happy either. We want more money, the newest car, the nicest clothing, the best jewelry, the most up-to-date cell phone out there, the newest game system. Our list goes on and on. Indeed, no matter what the circumstance, it seems as if we are never happy with what we have.

Maybe we can learn something from Paul. Maybe we could benefit from knowing how Paul learned to be happy with whatever he had, how he learned to be happy no matter what the circumstance. Maybe we need to learn the secret to happiness or contentment that Paul discovered. You see, he learned a really big thing--bigger even than Einstein's Theory of Relativity. He learned that contentment or happiness did not depend on how many or how few things he had.

The writer of Proverbs also clearly knew this. He prayed that he would neither be rich nor poor. He feared that if he were rich, he would forget that he needed God. And he feared that if he were poor, he would be tempted to steal and thus dishonor God.

In our time, we are tempted to think that if we just had more money, we would be content, or happy. Maybe we should pay attention to studies done on people who have struck it rich in the lottery. These studies have found that one year after winning the lottery, the winners were no more happy than those who had not won.

As a matter of fact, as the writer of Proverbs knew, riches can be very dangerous. Johnny Wray, the director of church's Week of Compassion, told of being invited

into the home of a poor family in South America. As he was getting ready to leave, he said a prayer that God would help the family in their need. Then the grandmother of the household asked to pray. She said, "Lord, please watch carefully over our new friends from North America. Please protect them, because it is far more dangerous to have too much than to have too little."

Paul learned that it is not the circumstances of life that make one happy or content. He learned that true contentment was found in his relationship with God. Listen to his words from our scripture lesson: "I can do all things through him who strengthens me" (Philippians 4:13). Yes, he, and yes, we can do all things through Christ who strengthens or sustains us. That is the secret that Paul learned. That is how Paul learned to be happy with whatever he had and how Paul learned to be happy no matter what the circumstance. The thought of Christ being there with him and sustaining him was all that Paul needed, and that was enough for him to be happy, no matter what the circumstance.

Tony Campolo tells about a man who got on an elevator in a very tall building. This man could have been like all the other businessmen on that elevator—serious, tense, gloomy. But he chose not to be like them. As he got on the elevator, he turned and faced the people behind him instead of facing the elevator doors. Then he smiled at all assembled and said, "We're going to be traveling together for quite a while, you know." And then he added, "What do you say we all sing?" And would you believe it, they did? All those serious business people sang a raucous round of "You Are My Sunshine." By the time they reached their floor, they were all laughing and relaxed.

This man realized what Paul realized. He realized that Christ was there with him and that Christ sustained him. This allowed him to be happy during this circumstance, while the rest of his companions on the elevator were serious, tense, and gloomy.

All of this is summed up in the powerful teaching of a man named Viktor Frankl. Dr. Viktor Frankl, author of the book Man's Search for Meaning, was imprisoned by the Nazis in World War II because he was a Jew. His wife, his children, and his parents were all killed in the holocaust. The Gestapo made him strip. He stood there totally naked. As they cut away his wedding ring, Viktor said to himself, "You can take my wife, you can take away my children, you can strip me of my clothes and my freedom, but there is one thing no person can ever take away from me—and

that is my freedom to choose how I will react to what happens to me!" Even under the most horrible of circumstances, Dr. Frankl taught us that we have a choice in how we respond that can transform even our tragedies into triumph.

Like Paul, Viktor Frankl was imprisoned. Like Paul, Frankl underwent torture and experienced tremendous loss. He could have given up on living, but he realized what Paul realized. He realized that God was with him and that God would sustain him. This allowed Frankl to endure even the most terrible of times.

What worked for Paul and Viktor Frankl could still work in our day. Imagine a family surviving an apartment fire and escaping with only the clothes on their backs being interviewed at a nearby church that provided food for them. Imagine the mother answering the reporter's questions by quoting from Paul's Letter to Timothy: "But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these."

And imagine missionaries being freed after a long and difficult period of captivity. Imagine one of them quoting from Paul's Letter to the Corinthians: "Therefore, I am content with weaknesses, insults, hardships, persecutions, and calamities for the sake of Christ, for whenever I am weak, Christ makes me strong."

My brothers and sisters in Christ, as you all know, this Thursday is Thanksgiving. You all might be wondering what there is to be thankful for in this day and age when everything around us seems so dark. Let us remember Paul. Even though Paul was in prison when he wrote Philippians, he remained thankful. Even the powerful Roman guards could not take that away from him. Why was he thankful? Paul was thankful for two reasons. First, Paul was thankful because he knew that God was with him. In Romans 8:38-39 Paul said, "For I am convinced that neither death, nor life, nor angels, nor rulers, nor things present, nor things to come, nor powers, nor height, nor depth, nor anything else in all creation will be able to separate us from the love of God in Christ Jesus our Lord" (p. 154). Paul was also thankful because he had a community of people who were concerned about him during his imprisonment.

Why can't we too be thankful? Why can't we likewise be thankful that God is with us everywhere we go? Why can't we too be thankful for a community of people who are there for us during the good times and the bad times? Why can't we be thankful for Christ and Christ's community praying for us and always there for

us? Maybe we shouldn't just set one day aside as a celebration of divine goodness. Maybe every day should be a celebration of divine goodness.

Yes, we have so much for which to be thankful. And on this day and every day, we, like Paul, have two very big reasons why we should be content. Number one: we have the church, the very Body of Christ, the community of faith. Number two: we have the Spirit of the living Christ with us. Yes, we are part of Christ's blessed and beloved community. And yes, we have Christ himself with us. What great treasures!

Hebrews 13:5 tells us, "keep your lives free from the love of money, and be content with what you have, for God has said, 'I will never leave you or forsake you.'" Paul could face anything, because in every situation, he had Christ. He discovered that the one who walks with Christ can cope with anything. With Christ, we too can face anything this world throws at us. With Christ, we can cope with anything. So, like Paul, maybe we be found this Thanksgiving Day and every day contented and thankful. Yes, we have Christ. Truly, Christ will never leave us or forsake us. Who could ask for more?

-- Zachary Chamberlain Diehl; Hickman Mills Community Christian Church; November 23, 2008