

November 24, 2013
Thanksgiving 2013

Have a Content Thanksgiving!
Philippians 4:10-13/Luke 17:11-19

Opening Words: How comfortable are you with your American history? Americans have been observing a national day of thanksgiving for a long time. Did you know in 1783 George Washington declared a Thanksgiving Day because the Revolution was over? Did you know in 1863 President Abraham Lincoln proclaimed the last Thursday in November 1863 as "a day of thanksgiving and praise to our beneficent Father?" Each year afterward, for 75 years, the President formally proclaimed that Thanksgiving Day should be celebrated on the last Thursday of November. That all changed in 1939. President Franklin D. Roosevelt set it one week earlier. Thanksgiving was observed on the fourth Thursday. He wanted to help the struggling economy by lengthening the shopping season. It wasn't until 1941 that Congress declared the fourth Thursday of November a national holiday, Thanksgiving!

The great Scottish philosopher and Politian of the late eighteenth century James Mackintosh once said, "*Be content with what you have, never with what you are.*" What is he saying? We should never be content with who we are. We can always be more loving! You can always be more compassionate! You can always be more patient! You should never be content with your relationship with God. You can always be a little more like Jesus. You should never be content with who you are, but you can learn to be content with what you have! That theme is at the very bottom of this morning's scripture lessons, Philippians 4:10-13 and Luke 17:11-19. Let me call this message *Have a Content Thanksgiving!*

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.

Luke 17:11-19 Now on his way to Jerusalem, Jesus traveled along the border between Samaria and Galilee. ¹² As he was going into a village, ten men who had leprosy^[a] met him. They stood at a distance ¹³ and called out in a loud voice, "Jesus, Master, have pity on us!"

¹⁴ When he saw them, he said, "Go, show yourselves to the priests." And as they went, they were cleansed.

¹⁵ One of them, when he saw he was healed, came back, praising God in a loud voice. ¹⁶ He threw himself at Jesus' feet and thanked him—and he was a Samaritan.

¹⁷ Jesus asked, "Were not all ten cleansed? Where are the other nine?" ¹⁸ Has no one returned to give praise to God except this foreigner?" ¹⁹ Then he said to him, "Rise and go; your faith has made you well."

Old Ben Franklin was right! He once said, "*Contentment makes poor men rich, but discontent makes rich men poor.*" I love the story of the rich industrialist who was disturbed to find a fisherman sitting lazily beside his boat. "Why aren't you out there fishing?" he asked. "Because I've caught enough fish for today," said the fisherman. "Why don't you catch more fish than you need?" the rich man asked. "What would I do with them?" asked the fisherman. "You could earn more money," came the impatient reply, "and buy a better boat so you could go deeper and catch more fish. You could purchase nylon nets, catch even more fish, and make more money. Soon you'd have a fleet of boats and be rich like me." The fisherman asked, "Then what would I do?" "You could sit down and enjoy life," said the industrialist. "What do you think I'm doing now?" the fisherman replied as he looked placidly out to sea. Benjamin Franklin once said, "*Content makes poor men rich; discontent makes rich men poor.*" How content are you? If that makes you think, say, "**Amen!**"

Today, we find ourselves in the fourth chapter of Philippians. These are some of the greatest words in the Bible. It is important that you know Paul wrote these words from a Roman prison cell. Many Biblical scholars believe he was waiting for execution. That is what makes verse 11 so amazing - it says, "I have learned to be content whatever the circumstances." Did you hear what he said? He said you can learn to be content in any circumstance. Many Biblical scholars believe he was waiting to be executed. How content will you be on this Thanksgiving?

So today, I want to help you live a more contented life. I want you to have a more content Thanksgiving. I am going to do that by asking you four questions. If Paul can learn to be content in his life, then we can learn to be content in our life. So if you are ready to begin, say, "**Amen!**"

How could it be worse?

This is question number one: how could it be worse? Someone once said, "*I complained about my old shoes until I met a man that had no feet.*" The person who first said that knew the power of our first question, *how could it be worse?* I began working on this sermon on Tuesday afternoon. I developed this point first, and I have to admit, this question changed my entire week. No matter what negative thing happened the rest of the week, I really didn't care. Because I nullified the negativity with the question, *how could it be worse?* It worked for me and it will work for you. I really encourage you to remember this question, *how could it be worse?* and apply it to your life. It really does change your attitude! Let me give you a few examples.

I don't know if you have noticed this, but I am growing a little grey. It bothered me for a while, but then I asked myself the question *how could it be worse?* Well, I could be growing bald! And suddenly I felt better.

I ran out of tooth paste the other day, and I didn't want to go to the store. I got upset, so I asked myself the question, *how could it be worse?* I could have no teeth!

This week, Kathryn and I drove to Springfield, Illinois. We were absorbed into the life of Abraham and Mary Lincoln. Their lives were amazing, and I wanted to stay longer to learn more, but I had to drive home yesterday to preach today. I didn't really want to drive home, so I asked myself the question, *how could it be worse?* I could have no job!

Last night, we drove as far as Kent, when we found ourselves in a white out. I couldn't see anything and was forced to drive at about 15 miles an hour. I thought, how could this be worse? Then, I saw a car sliding off the road.

My sister-in-law Sue and her significant other, Dan Tucker, are coming up from Florida for Thanksgiving. They are going to eat at my home and it is going to be a long day. I began to wonder, why couldn't I just stay in Springfield, Illinois for Thanksgiving? They must eat turkey. So I asked myself the question, *how could it be worse?* Well, they could be staying with me the whole weekend.

It is truly amazing how one single question, *how could it be worse?* has the ability to disarm any situation. No matter the situation, it could be worse. What is the worst thing that can happen? Death. But even when you die, you get to go to heaven. If you think you could use the question *how could it be worse?* in your life, say, "**Amen!**"

How long will your purchase make you happy?

This is question number two: how long will your purchase make you happy? In the fifth century, a man named Arenius was determined to live a holy life. He abandoned the comforts of Egyptian society to follow an austere lifestyle in the desert. Yet, whenever he visited the great city of Alexandria, he spent time wandering through its bazaars. Asked why, he explained that his heart rejoiced at the sight of all the things he didn't need. How many of your possessions do you really need?

We live in a society flooded with goods and gadgets. Consider this fact with me. A typical supermarket in the United States in 1976 stocked 9,000 articles; today it carries 30,000. This time of year we are flooded with advertising. Our televisions, radios, mailboxes and newspapers are filled with them. Each one promises to make your loved ones happy. How long will your gift make them happy? How long will your favorite gift make you happy? Don't misunderstand me. There is nothing wrong with Christmas presents. I hope to get one. However, the thrill of opening that gift will not last forever. The greatest gift you can give someone is yourself. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

Do you have a grateful heart?

This is question number three: Do you have a grateful heart? Thanksgiving is not just a holiday, it is an attitude. It is not just about eating turkey, it is about living a life that is filled with gratitude. Is your life filled with gratitude?

Years ago, Erma Bombeck told the story of an eight year-old girl by the name of Christina. She had cancer of the nervous system. When asked what she wanted for her birthday, Christina thought long and hard. She finally replied, "I don't know. I have two sticker books and a Cabbage Patch doll. I have everything!" In life we have a choice. We can see what we have, or we can see what we want. A grateful heart sees what it has. Do you have a grateful heart? If an eight year-old girl with cancer of the nervous system can be content with two sticker books and a Cabbage Patch doll, then you should be content with your life. And all of God's people said, "**Amen!**"

Where does your soul find true contentment?

This is question number four: where does your soul find contentment? In 2007, a large section of Southern California was ravaged by fires. Millions of people had to be evacuated. Many of those individuals only had a few minutes to leave their homes. Just think about that for moment. They only had minutes to evacuate their homes. They could only take the most valuable things in their lives. Time magazine reported on the story and asked this question on line. *What would you save?* Imagine a fire is headed toward your house and you only had ten minutes to leave. What would you save?

A small boy named Andrew said he would save his puppy, Hathaway.

Sherri said she would save family pictures.

Karen said she would save her cat and important documents.

Tom said he wouldn't take anything as long as his family was safe.

Natural disasters remind us that everything in this world is temporary. The most valuable things we have in our lives, the things that cannot be replaced, are the relationships we hold in our lives. The most challenging relationship in your life is your relationship with God. It is in your relationships that you find true contentment in your soul. If you find that to be true, say, "**Amen!**"

You know the story. Americans have been observing a day of thanksgiving for generations. Historians tell us the first recorded thanksgiving took place in Jamestown, Virginia. The winter of 1610 was harsh at Jamestown. Many settlers died. The group that once totaled 409 had been reduced to 60. Tradition tells us the survivors prayed for help, without knowing when or how it might come. When help arrived, in the form of a ship filled with food and supplies from England, a prayer meeting was held to give thanks to God. There is no mention of a feast. Maybe that is why it is not the famous Thanksgiving?

The Thanksgiving we remember happened in 1621. The Pilgrims left Southampton, England in 1620. They wanted religious freedom. There was trouble from the start. As they sailed around the south tip of the British Isles, one of the ships, the *Speedway*,

was ruled not seaworthy. The two ships stopped and some of the Pilgrims went home. However, some of the *Speedway's* passengers boarded the second ship, the *Mayflower*. Because of the extra weight, the trip took longer than the estimated 66 days. They had navigation problems too. They wanted to go to Virginia, but they arrived in New England. It was November and the weather was growing harsh. There was no time to build permanent shelters, so they survived that first winter in this new world in crude temporary housing. In time, disease came and the death toll began to rise. Only 51 of the original 102 saw the spring. When spring came, two things happened. First, the dead had to be buried. They were buried in unmarked graves so the local natives would not know how small their numbers had grown. Second, they were forced to make a painful choice. The *Mayflower* was a rented ship. It had to be returned. Would they stay in America or return to England? They decided to stay, and their luck began to change. Friendly Native Americans helped them plant 30 acres of wheat and build permanent shelters. By the fall of 1621, their homes were built and their crops were harvested. They decided to observe a day of thanksgiving to thank God for his blessings.

One of the things that was missing from my calendar this year was a Thanksgiving service. There was no mention about a service within my United Methodist circles. There was no discussion about a Thanksgiving service within my ecumenical circle. The reason is the same in both groups. People don't attend Thanksgiving services anymore. The times have changed. The contrast between the 1621 Pilgrims and our contemporary society is shocking. The Pilgrims who lost so much had time to thank God. We who have so much don't have time to thank God. I guess it is more important to get those pies in the oven!

Why is thanking God such a low priority in our lifetime? The reason is obvious. We don't look at what we have. We are more concerned with what we don't have. How content are you on this Thanksgiving? Old Ben Franklin was right! He said, "*Contentment makes poor men rich, but discontent makes rich men poor.*" And all of God's people said, **"Amen!"**