

First Presbyterian Church of Birmingham
Parables on the Way to the Cross: Finding Contentment
The Rev. Dr. John Judson
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Ecclesiastes 3:9-15; Luke 12:13-21

I want to begin this morning with a confession. That confession is that I have never particularly liked this parable. I haven't liked it for two reasons. First, I haven't liked it because even though I know better, what I have always perceived in it is a bias against those things I was taught by my parents; hard work, frugality and saving. Which is what it seems that this farmer is doing. The farmer is trying to make a go of it. He has several good harvests, stores his excess, and celebrates. Rather than celebrating his success the story seems to justify punishment for a person who has done well. The second reason that I haven't like this story comes in verse 20, when the man appears to be punished for saying, "Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink and be merry." After a lifetime of work, he was contented. He had found that elusive gift of contentment and then it is taken from him. No offense to Jesus and Luke, but my goal is to one day retire and find some contentment; to be able to relax, eat, drink and be merry. Any of you want that as well? So, the question becomes then, where can we find contentment?

Before we delve more deeply into the passage, I would like us to consider this idea of contentment. As far as I can discern there are two basic theories for finding contentment. They are accumulation and renunciation. First accumulation. The accumulation theory is that human beings find contentment in the accumulation of things. These things can be money, power, tech-goodies, friends or around here, classic cars. In fact, we have so much stuff that we need to rent storage places to put all the things we have no room for in our homes. The theory is that when we accumulate enough of the right thing then we can finally be content. The second theory of contentment is in renunciation. Simply put, renunciation is the practice of giving up the things of this world. The belief is that by people attaching themselves to the things of this world (accumulation), it only creates more desire, more greed and more unhappiness. To find contentment we must renounce the things of this world...we must detach ourselves from the desires that make us restless and discontented.

Returning to the story it would appear, at least on the surface, that Jesus is asking people to choose renunciation as the method for finding contentment. After all, the man in the parable has accumulated enough to retire and then God takes it all away from him through death. But I don't think that is what is really going on here; meaning I don't think Jesus is preferring renunciation over accumulation. I say that for two reasons. First, because Jesus, as a good Jew; he would know that the blessing that was given by God to God's people included not only spiritual blessings but material blessings. As the prophets declare, every person should be able to sit under their own vine and fig tree. It is this sense of accumulation that allows the writer of

Ecclesiastes to say, there is nothing better for human beings to eat, drink, and take pleasure in all their toil; and if anyone enjoyed life it was Jesus. Second, I don't believe Jesus has chosen renunciation, because Jesus makes this cryptic closing remark, "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God." What does this mean? In order to understand it, we need to translate it as, "So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich **in** God." I do so because what I believe Jesus is saying is that we find contentment when we are "in" God; meaning when God fills us, when we allow God to fill us with what Paul calls the fruits of the Spirit: love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, goodness and self-control. The man in the story was filled only with himself and his stuff, not God. If he had instead been filled with God, he would have been content long before he accumulated enough to fill bigger barns. He would have found contentment in the planting, harvesting, and sharing of what he had. He would have found it in the presence of God throughout his life, regardless of his successes or failures. Contentment in God would have been his constant companion and allowed him to eat, drink and be merry for a lifetime.

This morning we are offered an opportunity at this table to be filled with God. I don't mean that the elements of bread and wine are God, but that they are symbolic of the love of God poured out for us. And that when we partake of the elements we are partaking of God's love, joy, peace, patience, goodness, kindness, and faithfulness of God. We are holding them in our hands. We are seeing them with our eyes. We are allowing them to remind us that regardless of how big or small are our barns, how successful or unsuccessful we have been in the eyes of the world, how old or young we are, or where we are in life, we are valuable to God our creator, to the Son who gave his life for us, and to the Spirit who fills us now and always. This, my friends, is contentment. This, my friends, is contentment that we can have now and always. My challenge to you for this week then is to ask yourselves, how am I being in God and finding contentment.