

To Be Content

- ✦ in any circumstances (vv.10-13)
- ✦ overflowing with gratitude (vv.14-20)

In the name of Christ Jesus our joy, dearly beloved saints and heirs of heaven:

Have you noticed that along with other challenges of 2020, there seems to be a concerted effort on the part of some to get rid of Thanksgiving? Whether this is an actual goal of power hungry rulers or an honest effort to control the spread of the Coronavirus, we'll have to leave up to God. Only God can judge the thoughts and motives of men's hearts. In fact, the Apostle Peter shines the light on us when he says, ***“For the time has come for judgment to begin with the household of God. Now if it begins with us, what will be the end for those who disobey the gospel of God? And if it is hard for the righteous to be saved, where will the ungodly sinner end up? So let those who suffer according to the will of God entrust their souls to their faithful Creator while doing what is good.”*** (1 Peter 4:17–19 EHV¹) Truly it is good to give thanks and praise to God, with holy writers like Paul urging us tonight **To Be Content**....

✦ in any circumstances (vv.10-13)

More than any other than I know of, Thanksgiving is a national holiday that almost never was. According to one account, the Pilgrims almost did not survive long enough to celebrate the first Thanksgiving. William Bradford's wife drowned as they were coming ashore from the Mayflower, leaving him to raise their one-year-old son alone. Landing in Massachusetts, December 26, 1620, with barely enough food and no shelter for the winter? Naturally, most of the settlers would be sick within weeks. *“Ten of 17 husbands and fathers died with the ‘first infection,’ and of the 17 wives, only three were alive after three months. By April, more than half of the population had died of disease or famine.”*²

Summer of 1621, must have been mighty welcome to survivors. Maybe you remember stories of the Wampanoag Indians like Squanto teaching the Pilgrims to plant corn. One source says that other Indians did not use fish for fertilizer, but Squanto learned that farming technique during his captivity on the Continent after Europeans kidnapped him. It was a miracle to have him teaching them to hunt and fish in their new home. By this time that Fall, some were ready to declare a day for fasting and prayer. Gloom must have been knocking on every door and despair on every heart. But then one old man got up and called the assembly to a different course. *He said that he thought that they had brooded long enough over their misfortune and that it seemed high time that they should consider their blessings instead. The colony was growing strong. Harvests were becoming more plentiful, the rivers were full of fish and the woods with game, the air was sweet and the climate pleasant. Above all, he reminded them that they now possessed what they had come for, full civil and religious liberty. Accordingly he recommended that they appoint a day for thanksgiving rather than for fasting. His advice was followed, and from that time forward Thanksgiving Day has been regarded as a day of joy.*³

From prison the Lord's Apostle Paul calls to Christians through the ages in this letter to his dear friends in Philippi. Remember the jailer and Lydia with their families? Rejoicing in love for them Paul gives great advice: ***“I know what it is to live in humble circumstances, and I know what it is to have***

¹ EHV ~ Evangelical Heritage Version (<http://wartburgproject.org>) © 2019. NPH: 800-662-6022, Amazon-Kindle, LOGOS.

² Dobson, Shirley. *FOCUS ON THE FAMILY* magazine, November 2001, p.20.

³ Rein, R.C. *Treasury of Themes and Illustrations*. Milwaukee, Wisconsin: Northwestern Publishing House, 1983, ref. 1524.

more than enough. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation,...full or hungry, while having plenty or not enough. I can do all things through Christ, who strengthens me."

So what is that *secret of being content*? And then *in any and every situation*? It's not what Xcel Energy slammed my InBox with today. "We're Thankful for Good News..." they say. But their "Good News" is all about what they are doing to support local education. Who could argue with that? But if your thankfulness can't reach beyond the good you are doing, an honest assessment of how far short you fall will leave you in despair. Who of us has been patient as in patient endurance? Loving as in selfless, Christ-like love for others? All this God commands, but our failures hurt those around us.

Looking back on my preaching, there were nearly two decades without this text. Was that because all of us in America were so content for twenty years? Or were we growing so accustomed to "the good old days" that my sinful, selfish heart was forgetting God's goodness? Sometimes we can work on our faith like a sailboat that never leaves the dock. Or a shiny custom car that never gets off the blocks. How much use is a hunting rifle always behind glass? Or a four-by-four too polished to ever go off road? Until God strips away our blessings, it's hard to say we've really *learned the secret of being content, in any circumstances*. Like the old man advising the Pilgrims, Paul has a battle tactic **To Be Content** with...

✦ overflowing with gratitude (vv.14-20)

Thank God there's more here than mere happiness. Happiness is based on *happenings*, usually beyond our control. Paul could have been bitter and resentful because "*when I left Macedonia, not one church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving....*" Why is Paul so positive about the Philippians' gifts without asking for more? Makes you just want to pick up the phone and call Paul, "Say, you're in prison right?" "That's right." "In chains?" "Yes." "So you can't go wherever you want." "No, this is a kind of house arrest." "So what's your secret? Why are you so **Content**?" "Look back at verse 4." "*Rejoice in the Lord always! I will say it again: Rejoice!*" (Philippians 4:4 EHV) So everybody paste on smiles? "No, pay attention now. *Rejoice in the Lord*. Do I need to say it again? *Rejoice! Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near.*" Ah, there it is.

God calls not for happiness, but joy and rejoicing! Even in gut wrenching times, knowing the truly Good News that God loves you because of Jesus, gives death defying, despair denying joy! With David we pray in true repentance, "*Restore to me the joy of your salvation....*" (Psalm 51:12) And again, "*Praise the LORD, O my soul; all my inmost being, praise his holy name. Praise the LORD, O my soul, and forget not all his benefits – who forgives all your sins and heals all your diseases, who redeems your life from the pit and crowns you with love and compassion, who satisfies your desires with good things so that your youth is renewed like the eagle's.*" (Psalm 103:1-5 NIV84)

They may go soaring high above the earth below, but big bald eagles never sing. You can though, like the little birds God gives the sweetest songs. The canary, the wren and the lark are like those Christians who are small in their own eyes and constantly find more reasons to give glory to God.

In a lecture on *Relationships* in China (2005) some of the seventy-five Chinese attendees had not been in a church before; most were not Christian. In our discussion group one young man English named Harry gave this take-away from my lecture: Successful relationships are not based on what others do for us, but on what we do for others. Isn't that the heart of Christ's *agape*-love? Isn't that how love keeps **overflowing with gratitude**? God give us love in Christ's full and free forgiveness. Nothing missing in God's grace. God's love empowers ours to pass it on to others. In every age and culture the *secret* always remains: **J**esus; **O**thers; (then) **Y**ourself. Christ-like love built the first hospitals in compassion for souls redeemed by our Lord Jesus. *Agape*-love crosses language barriers and oceans still today.

"Have you so very much to be thankful for?" said a rich innkeeper to his neighbor, a poor weaver. "Why do you sing every morning, 'Now Thank We All Our God'? Your occupation yields little profit, and as a large family is dependent upon your support, you must find it hard to make both ends meet."

For *The Preacher's Apprentice (TPA)* sermon study or copies: m.cordes@comast.net . New Life Evangelical Lutheran Church
You can also call: 651-484-1169. Hear the sermon at www.newlifeshoreview.com . 180 County Rd F - Shoreview, MN 55126

“The last is true, neighbor,” said the weaver, “but as to thanking God, it is this way: We thank God for what we have, because what he has given us is for our benefit; and we thank him for what we have not, because we do not need it.”⁴

So it happened that the national holiday that almost never was became official in one of the most unlikely moments in our history. Sarah Hale was a young widow with five children who became a published author and editor to support her family. As a devout Christian, Sarah Hale injected religious issues into her editorials. In 1846, she launched a crusade to establish Thanksgiving as a holiday. Her stirring editorials and Thanksgiving issues of poetry, stories, and turkey recipes were part of her barrage as she pelted politicians with personal letters until 1859, when thirty governors had agreed to a common day of Thanksgiving. Before she could do more, the Civil War erupted in 1861. “In 1863, she wrote President Lincoln, *laying before you a subject of deep interest... the day of our annual Thanksgiving made a national and fixed union festival*. The beleaguered president finally agreed, and on **October 3, 1863**, he established Thanksgiving as a national holiday for the last Thursday of November. Even in war, Lincoln said, we can count our blessings: “They are gracious gifts of the most high God, who, while dealing with us in anger for our sins, hath nevertheless remembered mercy.”⁵

To Be Content with the ways of God and to have a cheerful heart are worth more than all earth’s riches. When by God’s grace you can call the Lord of heaven and earth your dear Father in Christ, you are constantly comforted, even rejoicing though the sun does not always brighten your path.⁶ ***“Two things I ask of you, O LORD; do not refuse me before I die: Keep falsehood and lies far from me; give me neither poverty nor riches, but give me only my daily bread. Otherwise, I may have too much and disown you and say, ‘Who is the LORD?’ Or I may become poor and steal, and so dishonor the name of my God.*** (Proverbs 30:7–9 NIV84) ***Godliness with contentment is great gain. For we brought nothing into the world, and we can take nothing out of it. But if we have food and clothing, we will be content with that. People who want to get rich fall into temptation and a trap and into many foolish and harmful desires that plunge men into ruin and destruction.*** (1 Timothy 6:6–9 NIV84) ***Keep your lives free from the love of money and be content with what you have, because God has said, “Never will I leave you; never will I forsake you.”*** (Hebrews 13:5 NIV84)

If you want to make the devil squirm, if you want the godless Christ-haters of this world to whine, if you want to put down your own selfish, sin-driven complaints, then rise up in thanks to God. ***“Praise the Lord!”*** even from prison, says Paul. Focus on Jesus. That’s the ***secret to being content in any and every situation***. And that will keep you ***content*** long after COVID hits the ash heap of history and long into that eternal day when nothing but praise and joy will fill our hearts and lives. ***“Praise the Lord!”*** Amen.

⁴ Rein, R.C. *Treasury of Themes and Illustrations*. Milwaukee, WI: NPH, 1983, ref. 1520.

⁵ Morgan, Robert J. *On This Day*. © 1997. Thomas Nelson, Inc.. © 1999-2001, Wheeler, Rairdin. www.Laridian.com .

⁶ Rein, R.C. *Treasury of Themes and Illustrations*. Milwaukee, WI: NPH, 1983, ref. 1520.

For *The Preacher’s Apprentice (TPA)* sermon study or copies: m.cordes@comast.net . New Life Evangelical Lutheran Church
You can also call: 651-484-1169. Hear the sermon at www.newlifeshoreview.com . 180 County Rd F - Shoreview, MN 55126