

Text: I Timothy 6: 6-19  
Title: Hungry Hearts  
Date: 09.29.19  
Roger Allen Nelson

Ben was an earnest-curious-kindhearted kid and a voracious reader; as a high school senior he was assigned an essay about his hopes and dreams. Listen to part of what he wrote:

*In a stunning turn of events I will reverse the trend of high school to date and later marry a beautiful woman. I will inevitably be the envy of all my friends, whose wives (mildly attractive) will pale in comparison to my wife (very attractive). Intelligent and strong willed, my wife will clearly stand out, not because of her great looks, but because of her natural and refined presence. I do not plan on having a trophy wife whose purpose is that of novelty – my shallowness does have its limits. She will be my best friend and lasting companion, not because a marriage requires it, but because we are happiest in each other's presence.*

*One late afternoon, my two sons will play catch in the backyard, while my wife waters the garden, laughing and smiling, and deriving pleasure from the game her two sons are playing. I will join them and fire up the grill for hamburgers. And we will sit and eat and be happy together: a classic American family enjoying a classic American meal, until the sun begins to fade on an idealistic, yet obtainable scene.*

*When my ancestors first came to America they toiled in backbreaking labor, but they were satisfied because they knew they had, at the very least, brought their children to a land where the opportunities were bountiful. Each successive generation has built upon that dream. It has flourished and grown, and now that it is in my hands, I will carry on the dream and know the same contentment.*

Today Ben is single, in his thirties, lives in Berlin, and travels the world writing for the Smithsonian and the New Yorker. But, as a high school student he sketched the American dream, with the optimism of youth and the confidence of the upper-middle class....

And who can argue with his picture of the good life?

There are healthy relationships, a sense of history, evidence of gratitude, conversations with children over dinner, and a measure of personal responsibility. Add a little faith, maybe a prayer before dinner and a church around the corner, and Ben captured the quintessential American dream.

The meritocracy is intact. With a good education, hard work, thriftiness, a little luck, and a commitment that is not derailed by difficulties, you too can know the same contentment.

Right? Right?  
Or, is there something more?

In the opening line of our text Paul pricks the philosophic bubble. The word here translated as “contentment” can better be translated as “self-sufficiency,” or “soul-sufficiency.” It was familiar to the Greeks and it meant a kind of detachment or independence from external circumstances. It championed an existence that wasn’t tied to the whim of emotion, the change of situation, or the fluctuations of life. There was a sort of stoic center. In the words of Aristotle, "The complete good is thought to be self-sufficient." Same word.

And, Paul taps into that thinking when he writes things like:

*I have learned to be content whatever the circumstance. I know what it is like to be in need, and I know what it is like to have plenty. I have learned the secret to being content in any every situation, whether well fed or hungry, whether living in plenty or want. I can do everything through him who gives me strength.*

*Philippians 4:11-13*

Paul’s twist is that contentment is not found in the ability to temper desires and roll with the changes, but contentment is found in what God has done in Christ.

Sufficiency is not what I do, but what is done by Christ.

Sufficiency is not in self, but in Christ.

Sufficiency is not what I own, but who owns me.

To tweak the language of the Heidelberg Catechism:

*What is your only contentment in life and in death?  
That I am not my own, but belong – body and soul, in life and in death – to my faithful savior Jesus Christ.*

So, Paul writes to his young friend . . .

Mercy was had on me. God poured out love and faith. (2 weeks ago)

Therefore, we are free to live in relationship/dialogue with God. (Last week)

And this morning, godliness (living that I-Thou relationship) is linked to contentment. And, the root of contentment is not stoic independence, but rather a deep sense of dependence on God.

But, truth be told, that misses my friend, Ben.

Ben is not asking questions about soul-sufficiency and dependence on God. He is not connecting contentment to some-thing done by some-one some-two thousand years ago. He is not writing about a relationship of faith. He is writing about a link between prosperity and promise, between consumption and contentment.

Ben knows that you come into this world naked and you leave the same way. He knows that there are no U-Hauls on hearses. He knows that wealth is fleeting, uncertain, and transitory. But, he also knows that in this culture contentment is realized in getting a slice of the pie.

For, as Arthur Simon, founder and president emeritus of Bread for the World, writes:

*The problem is not that we tried faith and found it wanting, but that we have tried mammon and found it addictive, and as a result find following Christ inconvenient....*

And, dear friends, therein lies the rub.

Our text this morning cuts against the grain. Our culture champions consumption and convenience as the route to contentment. Our economic engine runs on discontentment. There is always something newer and better and bigger and brighter and cooler. There is always the longing for more. And we are (collectively) buried in debt because of it. We are bombarded every day with a curriculum that links personal worth and happiness with purchasing power.

We may get glimpses of contentment, on a late summer afternoon while our children frolic on the lawn as we grill up slabs of meat, but more often than not contentment is just out of our grasp. Contentment lies out there in just one more thing, or just one more experience, or just one more relationship, or just one more something. In the words of the poet, "Everybody's got a hungry heart."

Paul's counter claim is that wealth is a temptation and a trap and a root of evil. It is one root of evil, there are others....

So, what then are we to make of all of this? What does a letter to a young Christian in first century Turkey say to us, or to my friend Ben?

See if this image helps....

We have ivy growing all over one side of our house. It reaches up to the gutters and crawls across the windows with tiny little suction cups that adhere to everything. Although it looks quaint, I worry about it and believe that it's bad for the bricks. Sandi is quick to remind me that there are a lot of old buildings that are covered in ivy.

Every few years I tear down the ivy. I yank on the vines and scrub the bricks but it's hard to find the roots. At ground level they are knotted and twisted and buried deep in the underbrush. Even as its tentacles reach out and devour the house I know there must be only one or two essential tap roots. And if I could get to those roots, if I could get to the source, I could affect some change, and I could save the house!

To tweak Paul's language a little....

If the tap root is self, if contentment is found in self-sufficiency, self-satisfaction, self-aggrandizement, self-glorification, self-ishness, then it will eventually devour the house. Its appetite will never be satisfied and there will always be a relentless hunger for something more...

But, if the root is grace, if contentment is found in the self-giving love of God in Christ, if the beginning place is neither earned nor earnable, then we are free to live in gratitude. If we are grounded in an economy that overflows with

abundance – grace, love, acceptance, forgiveness (this is from chapter 1, two weeks ago) – then we’re free to enjoy and use every gift for the good of others. And in that there is a measure of contentment. The vines from that root don’t choke out life but lead to as Paul puts it, “life that is truly life.” If we are rooted not in consumption but in abundance then we are free to seek first the kingdom with confidence and generosity, with the faith that this abundance is sustained past the life that we know.

About 15 years ago all incoming freshmen at Duke University were given two gifts. They all received early versions of the iPod and copies of the book, *Mountains beyond Mountains: The Quest of Dr. Paul Farmer*.

Paul Farmer is a doctor from Harvard who lives and works primarily in Haiti; his life’s mission is to cure infectious diseases and to deliver the best of modern medicine to those who need it the most. It is the great story of one quirky man making a difference in global health.

iPods and a book. Harvard gave those students a tool and a vision – the promise of technology and a picture of servanthood. They placed them at the crux of this text: How can we know a contentment that frees us to use whatever we have for the good others?

At one point in the book the author is puzzled by Farmer wearing a large wooden cross. He doesn’t know that it is simply the symbol of a radically different root. And I know the same is true for Ben. He sees the vines of American Christianity devouring the house and finds the root of God in Christ on the cross as a mystifying and quaint relic.

Dear friends, in global village that is marked by giant gaps of inequality, and a meritocracy that works for the some and not for the many, it is hard to know what is enough or how to tame the beast of wanting more. And at least for this preacher there is always some longing for contentment. Our hungry hearts are never fully satisfied this side of the eschaton.

But, as we are rooted in the abundance of God, expressed in the mystery of the cross, as we know that we are loved and accepted, as we live into the sufficiency of Christ, then we are free to use

all that we have,  
and all we that are,  
and all that we want,  
for the sake of others.

And in that may we know contentment.

Even, so come Lord Jesus.  
Amen.