

Philippians 4:6-20  
"Contentment"  
Thanksgiving Eve

November 22, 2023  
Prince of Peace Lutheran Church, West Salem, Wisc.  
Pastor Peter Adelsen

Grace, mercy, and peace be to you from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ! Amen! Dear brothers and sisters in Christ:

Through the Holy Spirit, St. Paul writes: *"I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content"* (Philippians 4:11b).

Do you ever feel troubled? Do you ever feel anxious? Do you ever feel that life makes little or no sense?

Who here has heard of Amyotrophic Lateral Sclerosis? It's a mouthful. But you know what it is. You know it as Lou Gehrig's Disease, or ALS, which is a brutal disease that causes the brain to lose control of the body's muscles.

As he played for the New York Yankees from 1923 to 1939, Lou Gehrig was known as the "Iron Horse," as he held the Major League Baseball record for consecutive games played – 2,130 games. That's 14 years without missing a game. This record seemed unbreakable until Cal Ripken broke it in 1995. Gehrig was known for his tenacity and drive as he played day in and day out.

Despite his consecutive game record, Gehrig is likely most known today for his farewell speech that he delivered to a packed Yankee Stadium when he retired prematurely due to the disease. He spoke: *"Fans, for the past two weeks, you have been reading about the bad break I got. Yet today, I consider myself to be the luckiest man on the face of the earth."*

How could he consider himself to be lucky? After all, his career is being cut short! These words seem so foreign to us. Shouldn't he have said, *"I deserve better than this!"*

How can anyone be so content when their world seems to be crumbling around them? How could anyone be content when facing financial concerns, sickness, disease, uncertainty, pain, or even death?

Some people find contentment in being stoic in the face of adversity. You know those people who never seem to let anything get to them. Nothing gets to them because they've shut themselves off from all things outside themselves. But just as they won't let troubles get them down, they also won't let joy bring them elation. They have just constructed a cold, empty life for themselves. And in their attempt to protect themselves from the pain of turmoil, they have robbed themselves of life's beauty and joy.

Others may find contentment by finding someone who is worse off than they are, saying, "*At least I'm not in his shoes.*" While there is some wisdom in this insight, that's not how you find contentment. A relentless search for someone who is to be pitied more than you will leave you discouraged because your focus will be on life's tragedies. Maybe this is why watching the evening news is popular, since you can always say, "*At least I'm not in his shoes.*"

In our reading from Philippians 4, the Apostle Paul describes the true meaning of contentment. But the fullness of what Paul teaches only becomes apparent when we know the conditions in which he wrote this epistle. You see, Philippians is one of Paul's prison letters. And he is in prison for the sake of the Gospel, which should not surprise you since he spent about one quarter of his missionary career in prison.

While none of us would like to be in prison today, what Paul endured makes today's prisons appear more like a resort hotel with law libraries, cable tv, and recreation.

You see, Roman imprisonment was preceded by being stripped naked and then flogged, which was a humiliating, painful, and bloody ordeal. These wounds would go untreated as the prisoners sat in painful leg or wrist chains. Most cells were dark, unbearably cold, with little water, cramped quarters, and had a sickening stench. Because of these miserable conditions, many prisoners begged for a speedy death.

But then there's Paul. He's not begging for a speedy death. Here's Paul chained alongside murderers and swindlers and all that Paul has done was proclaim the saving Gospel of Jesus Christ. He is surrounded by those who are longing for death, because of these conditions. But not Paul. Instead, he writes: "***I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content. I know how to be brought low, and I know how to abound. In any and every circumstance, I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and need. I can do all things through Him who strengthens me***" (Philippians 4:11b-13).

On this Thanksgiving Eve, our likely situation on this holiday is far from Paul's situation. As we all head to our family Thanksgiving feast, you will likely have the staples: turkey, stuffing, cranberry sauce, rolls, and pie. To top it all off: nine hours of football. And Thanksgiving meal leftovers.

How can Paul be content? Well, the secret of Paul's contentment is Jesus Christ. So, as long as your attention is focused inward upon yourself, you will never find true contentment.

But fixing your eyes on Jesus will bring contentment even in the darkest times. Paul says that he is content because ***"I can do all things through Him who strengthens me"*** (Philippians 4:13). Paul does not have delusions of grandeur, that Christ will make all of his troubles disappear so his cold prison cell will become a hotel suite. Paul is anticipating ongoing suffering and even death at the hands of Christ's enemies. Yet, Paul knows – *he knows for a fact* – that no one can rob him of Jesus. Paul can do all things through Christ who strengthens him so that no matter what he faces, he will remain strong in Christ.

Paul says, ***"I have received full payment, and more. I am well supplied"*** (Philippians 4:18a). Paul is content in all circumstances because his contentment is grounded not in his circumstances, but in Christ. And so is yours.

Each year, your Thanksgiving meal is a bit different than the past. Some of you will be missing loved ones. It may be death that has parted you from loved ones, or it could be family strife has robbed you of seeing a loved one. Yet, contentment remains yours in Christ.

None of that can rob you of Christ. Now, this doesn't mean that life is easy on Thanksgiving or any other holiday, or any other day of the year. Remember, Paul didn't have it easy in prison. We don't have it easy either, as each of us have a personal cross to bear. But we don't bear it alone. Christ is with you to shoulder your burden. He has already carried your burden to the cross. And He has risen triumphant from the grave, victorious over your burden. So, Christ strengthens you just as He strengthened Paul. ***"I can do all things through Him who strengthens me"*** (Philippians 4:13).

Christ's strength is bound up in what He delivers to you. If you will not be feasting this Thanksgiving holiday, Christ promises that the Day is coming when He will deliver an eternal feast to you. If you are feasting this Thanksgiving holiday, Christ promises that His coming feast dwarfs whatever you will eat. A banquet table is spread for all. That is contentment.

If death has separated you from someone you love, you are not alone, for Christ dwells with you. If division prevents you from sitting at the table with your parent, child, spouse, sibling, or friend, Christ comes to assure you that He has brought you peace with the Father. Sin divided you from God, but through Christ you have been reconciled to the Father through His suffering and death on the cross. That is contentment.

And there is more. The Day is coming when there will be a full and perfect reunion for all those who have lived and died with faith in Christ. The Day is coming when death will not separate us, for death will be destroyed. The Day is coming when all our divisions will be overcome by Christ as we are perfectly united with Him, and so we will be perfectly united with one another.

Until that great and magnificent Day, Christ sustains you, providing you with His perfect companionship in His Means of Grace – *His Word and Sacrament* – so that you would not lose heart. Paul says, ***“My God will supply every need of yours according to His riches in glory in Christ Jesus”*** (Philippians 4:19). This is what Paul is talking about when he says, ***“I can do all things through Him who strengthens me”*** (Philippians 4:13). Here, in this place is where God strengthens us. Here is where the penitent comes to receive Christ's forgiveness. This is the secret to Paul's contentment and to yours as well. Christ alone brings you contentment, because by grace through faith in Him, you have it all: forgiveness, life, and salvation. Amen.

The peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, keep your hearts and minds in Christ Jesus, our Lord. Amen.

**+ SOLI DEO GLORIA +**