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*this way forward*

## FINDING PEACE...IN THE PRESENT...THROUGH CONTENTMENT

1 Timothy 6:6-8

September 16, 2018

Dr. Thomas E. Evans

*Yesterday is history, tomorrow is a mystery, today is a gift of God, which is why we call it the present.*

I am sure many of you have heard Bill Keane's marvelous quote that reminds us to treasure each moment of life here and now. But sometimes it is a literal present we want most presently!

As a teenager at St. Stephen's Episcopal Day School for Boys I was introduced to the sport of lacrosse. It looked to be a tremendous amount of fun, whipping that ball around while racing up and down the field body checking players out of bounds.

So I begged and pleaded with my mom for months, "I want a lacrosse stick, please let me have a lacrosse stick."

She asked what I was going to do with it: "Are you going to join the lacrosse team?"

"Of course not; that would interfere with golf!"

I just wanted it to mess around with. I was absolutely convinced that I needed this lacrosse stick. I talked about it for months through the fall.

"Mom, I would use it to exercise, for hand-eye coordination, and to help make new friends whenever there is a pick-up lacrosse game. Please!"

Finally, Christmas rolled around and, to my great surprise, there it was! My lacrosse stick! I played with it all Christmas day. It was so much fun! .... And then proceeded to never pick it up again... Last Christmas, my mom reminded me of that fact once again!

But something had gotten a hold of me, making me feel like I absolutely needed this thing in order to be happy, in order to be content! In order to be at peace.

Paul simply tells Timothy, "Be content... with what you have." But is it really that easy? To simply decide that I am at peace with my possessions, my finances, my station in this life? It certainly didn't seem to be, once that lacrosse stick was lodged in my brain.

When we are young, we spend a great deal of time and energy grasping for things. For more material goods, more respect in work, and more money in the bank. In Alabama, when the housing boom was at its peak, people were buying these gigantic houses – six thousand square feet! But it was 6,000 nearly-empty square feet. They so overspent on the size of their house, that they could not afford to buy furniture. (They could have bought 500 lacrosse sticks for that!)

But something had them convinced that bigger is better – no matter what. At least the neighbors will see what a large house they have or what a nice car they drive. Like that lacrosse stick, this urge, this yearning, this desire, had taken hold of them beyond anything rational.

It certainly didn't seem as easy as simply deciding to be content! If it was, they never would have enslaved their life to that mortgage.

Paul tells Timothy it is a trap and, like a trap, once you've stepped in it, you have been ensnared. And getting out is a whole lot harder than getting in.

For many of those Alabamians, once the market crashed, their problems multiplied. Jobs dried up and now they were deep, deep, deep under water in a house they couldn't afford, with maintenance they couldn't do, spending time wandering through an empty house as a perpetual reminder of their error.

Materialism is a trap that can erode peace... for decades.

But it is not just mania for material things that draw us from contentment; from having peace in the present. It can be anything.

Even those of spiritual profession can fall into the trap of climbing the ladder. Monks aspiring to be the Abbot. Preachers seeking tall steeples.

Centuries ago, Benedictine monks saw the dangers of continually aspiring to be somewhere other than where you were, whether that was a physical place or a place of power or wealth.

Each Benedictine monk must take a vow of stability. A vow that they will spend out their life not only as a monk, but a Benedictine monk. And not only as a Benedictine, but a Benedictine in a particular monastery.

Thomas Merton explains: “By making a vow of stability the monk renounces the vain hope of wandering off to find a ‘perfect monastery.’ This implies a deep act of faith: the recognition that it does not much matter where we are or whom we live with.”

One monastery describes what it means to them,

*Ultimately there is no escape from oneself, and the idea that things would be better someplace else is usually an illusion.*

This devotion of stability is a strategic decision by the monks. It is an intentional grasping for more God rather than more things. It is their way to live out Isaiah’s words:

*You will keep him in perfect peace,  
whose mind is stayed on You, because  
he trusts in You.*

Whenever temptation to look beyond what they have arises, they remember their vow and they turn to God in prayer. Through deep practice, they discover the far-more fulfilling reaches of time with God.

So, in this way, finding peace in the present through contentment is as straightforward as making a choice to be so. But that is when the work

begins. The work of prayer and of discipline that over time becomes a part of who you are.

But there is still yet another aspect to being content with our present life – beyond not grasping for more things or grasping more status – and that is not grasping for a return of the past.

This is finding peace with the inexorable march of life.

Sometimes the present marches forward so relentlessly we have a hard time being content with where we are, because it keeps changing.

What is it they say about parenthood? “The days are long, but the years fly by.”

Many of you know that Wendy and I now have a house filled with emptiness. Oh, it has furniture, but there are no kids.

And, in one sense, there is a newfound peace.

No more fighting over the TV.

No more Wendy telling Matthew to pick up his clothes.

No more teen snark.

(And, to be fair, he will have no more parental hovering either.)

These are the little, lowercase “peaces” in our life; the absence of stressors.

But, it is not the kind of peace I want. I am not content with it. Not yet.

Who am I going to watch *Iron Man* with?

It feels more like a tearing apart; a tearing of our family. But Paul tells us that the key to peace in the present is contentment. Be content with your life. But change is hard. Life is hard.

Finding peace in the present means finding a way to move past the dread of inevitable change that marks life every few years.

Now, I will adjust. And I will come to peace with this change, though it will take some time.

I don't want to be an empty nester, but I know it is right for Liz and Matt to leave the nest; to find their way. I don't like it, so I need to come to peace with it by giving it to God and reminding myself it is best for them.

But if peace is wholeness, then finding peace with change is mending the fabric of your life back together once it's been torn apart – sometimes adding pieces that weren't there before.

I have added something new. I now have something wonderfully new in my relationship with my daughter Liz, who flew the coop ten years ago. We are workout buddies now! We go to the gym twice a week and, on Saturdays, Wendy, Liz, and I go to brunch afterwards!

But there are others tears that are not so easy to mend; other changes that are just as inevitable seem downright cruel: the onset of Alzheimer's, which plagues so many people in our congregation; the relentless disease of Parkinson's; the loss of a spouse or a parent.

These changes don't just create a rip in the fabric of our life, they can tear it to shreds.

If peace is a sense of wholeness and completeness, how can we be content with a present that has torn us into pieces which cannot be sewn back in?

However, even in this, peace is possible. It is a stronger, more powerful peace than simple contentment for our present life.

As things of great value are torn out of our life, it gives us a chance, first of all, to treasure those things that remain. For a loved one with Alzheimer's, singing along with a beloved hymn can mean the world.

But, as pieces are torn out that cannot be replaced, the only thing left to put there is God.

Someone recently shared with me that, in the midst of a debilitating disease, she found that she had only been paying lip service to her faith. As the disease robbed her of the life she once knew, she

turned to God and she wove in prayer, she wove in faith, she wove in trust, and she wove in reliance upon God's mercy. She discovered a deeper, a richer, and more powerful faith than she had ever known – one she finds more blessing in, through helping others with similar trials. Truly, it sounds like she has found a measure of peace that could not come without such a harsh trial.

The culmination of Paul's words to Timothy, are found in verses 18 and 19,

*...do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for [your]selves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that [you] may take hold of the life that really is life.*

Be content with whatever you have, wherever you are, in whatever stage of life you find yourself, so that you, too, may take hold of the life that is really life. Amen.