



# The New England Church Pulpit

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COMMUNING WITH CONTENTMENT

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Matthew 6.25-34

*Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat or what you will drink, or about your body, what you will wear. Is not life more than food and the body more than clothing? Look at the birds of the air; they neither sow nor reap nor gather into barns, and yet God feeds them. Are you not of more value than they? And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? And why do you worry about clothing? Consider the lilies of the field, how they grow; they neither toil nor spin, yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the fire, will he not much more clothe you—you of little faith? Therefore do not worry, saying, 'What will we eat?' or 'What will we drink?' or 'What will we wear?' For it is the people who have no faith who strive for all these things; and indeed your heavenly father knows that you need all these things. But strive first for the kingdom of God and for righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. So do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will bring its own concerns. Today is enough for you to consider.*

Hinduism

Bhagavad Gita 5.10-12

*Those who surrender to God all selfish attachments are like the leaf of a lotus floating clean and dry in the water. Sin cannot touch them. Renouncing their selfish attachments, those who follow the path of service work with body, senses, and mind for the sake of self-purification. Those whose consciousness is unified abandon all attachment to the results of action, and attain supreme peace.*

Author Andrew Greeley, in his book *The Seven Vices*, tells a modern parable:

Once there was a poker club, four men who gathered on the first Tuesday of each month to play penny ante. Not much money changed hands, and they had a good time. One man brought the cards, another chips, a third dip, and the fourth beer. The host sometimes provided sandwiches but that didn't happen each week. Then one night the host decided to grill some hamburgers. Not to be outdone, the next month the host made pasta, a specialty of his. The month after that there were steaks. Then the man whose turn it was to bring the beer brought Guinness Stout...and the *beer* competition began. Someone suggested they play for a dime a point. Pretty soon everyone was trying to outdo one another and the four men saw one another as competitors rather than friends. The club collapsed. None of them ever played poker together again.

Theologian Brett Younger comments that we are better off being grateful for sandwiches and pennies than wishing we had steak and dollars all of the time. Ingratitude is always a threat.

*(Lectionary Homiletics, Volume XXII, Number 3)*

One of life's greatest challenges, especially in a consumer culture such as ours, is being content with what one has. It is tempting to think that if *this much* makes life good, having *twice this much* will make life twice as good. Like the farmer in another of Jesus' parables, we are always dissatisfied with the way things are and always longing for more, so we build bigger barns in anticipation of bigger crops, increased wealth, and high social status. But in that story Jesus asks: is what you gain from that increase worth what you lose? What do we risk in friendships and fun, in losing our souls and our priorities, by raising the ante—from pennies to dimes, from sandwiches to steaks—and risk losing the whole thing?

Gratitude for what we have is one of the elusive secrets of a happy and contented and meaningful life. It is not easy, nor is it popular, to be content with what we have because there's always a newer model, a more fashionable style, more bells and whistles to be had. A consumer culture does not survive well on people being contented with what they have, so we are bombarded with clever ads to trick us into thinking that more and bigger and newer is better. That is counter to experience, however, for the secret of life is to expect nothing out of life but to be thankful for every little thing.

Jesus commends us to the world around us, to the world inside us, to the world as it is, for the secret to happiness is right in front of us. Look at the birds of the air, Jesus says. Do the sparrows upgrade their nests each year or do the red feathers of cardinals because their own seems drab and dull? Look at the flowers of the field. Do they need to adorn themselves with anything more than what they have already been given in order to be more beautiful? Why worry, then, about your own appearance, what you will wear or what you will eat? Why worry and complain about life? Can you add a year to your life by worrying? Can you become taller by worrying about your stature? Paradoxically, the things that make life abundant and joyous, though right in front of our noses, are hidden by our desire to want more than what we have.

We all know people who are beset by the worst that life can offer but who are able to look at the bright side of things; who realize that there are others worse off; who, in the midst of their struggles, their pain and their handicaps, are not bitter but joyful with what they have rather than what they don't have. They realize that even their lot in life may be a gift in disguise so they content themselves to discovering and embracing all that makes life good.

The story is told of the Taoist farmer whose only horse ran away. The neighbors came to console the farmer over his terrible loss. The farmer said, "What makes you think it is so terrible?" A month later, the horse came home, bringing with her two beautiful wild horses. The neighbors became excited at the farmer's good fortune. Such lovely strong horses! The farmer said "What makes you think this is such good fortune?" Soon afterward, the farmer's son was thrown from one of the wild horses and broke his leg. All the neighbors were very distressed. Such bad luck, they said. The farmer asked, "What makes you think it is bad?" A war came, and every able-bodied man was conscripted and sent into battle. Only the farmer's son, because he had a broken leg, remained. The neighbors congratulated the farmer. "What makes you think this is good?" asked the farmer.

The story can go on ad infinitum because it is the story of life. It is the story of thankfulness or bitterness, of worry with what isn't or contentment with what is. It is the story of the birds of the air, and the lilies of the field. Good things are often hiding in plain sight in the events of each day. If we will but look with the eyes of contentment and trust with a heart of thankfulness, we will realize that much good surrounds us if we will take the time and effort to be mindful.

When you're down, find a flower to consider. Let it paint a picture of beauty in your mind to take with you through the day. When you're angry, find a bird to consider, and watch it soar. When you're disappointed, consider the sliver of moon shining brightly over the snow-covered earth, a tree changing color or a leaf floating on water. When you're hurt or frustrated or put off by something, take notice of your breath, consider your pulse, and be reminded of the God in you. Remember that when you want something more than sandwiches and your poker friends, you take the risk of losing what already makes you happy but which you haven't noticed.

Jesus reminds us that the very things that we need to make us happy, to bring us fulfillment, to accompany joy are the things we already have. We don't need to pursue them; they have pursued us. Being mindful of what we *have* and not regretting what we *don't have* is the secret of happiness in life.

Robert Frost penned a poem that is parable in verse of an event that could have annoyed but ultimately inspired him:

The way a crow shook down on me  
the dust of snow from a hemlock tree  
has given my heart a change of mood  
and saved some part of a day I had rued.

Today we come to reenact once again the ancient ritual of communion where we are reminded that contentment is a spiritual adventure. These small portions of bread and wine are parables in miniature of a peace that prevails in the present because that is where God is. This treasure is found where we are; in what we do; in who we are, in who we know; in who we love; in who loves us; in where we go; in what we see. It is hidden in plain sight in the flower of the field, the birds of the air; in our daily routine, at our home, at our school, at our work. Around this table we come to remember that all we need to live gratefully surrounds us each day. Amen.

--Rev. Gary L. McCann

(Thanks to Brett Younger for his sermon "Simply Grateful" as printed in *Lectionary Homiletics*, Volume XXII, Number 2, pp 36-37 from which this sermon borrows extensively).

## PASTORAL PRAYER

We enter these moments with awe for the power of silence and awe for the power of words. There are times when our deepest longings find no words to describe themselves; there are times when our wildest celebrations can't find enough words to exclaim how we feel. We gather here to just be.....to let life be what it is, to let you be who you are, to affirm that we are who we are without need to correct or admonish or improve or judge. We are content to just be who we are in this moment.

There are voids to be filled, and so often our rushing and our busyness are attempts to fill the emptiness with activity so we don't feel the pain. So often our loneliness overwhelms us, and our cares weigh heavily on our hearts as stones pulling us ever deeper into a quagmire of hopelessness. Our fears have been intensified these past few months, and we find ourselves not quite able to trust the future as we have in the past. We have tried to resist our own proclivity to have more, to be the best, to over achieve, to clamor after the glitter of the world. Sometimes we are successful and other times we give in.

Corporate America has failed to give us any security; politicians fail to provide little trust in the systems we have long valued; dreams are shattered; hatred across the globe and in our own backyard threatens our faith in humanity. We are saddened by organizations—religious and political—that trade in the condemnation of those who are unlike them. And we are saddened.

And yet.....and yet, we dare to come to this place and face reality with some sense of hope that life is still good, that we can go forward, that the fear and the pain will be redeemed for holy purpose, and the future dreams of peace can become reality in some small way through our efforts. May our small investments in peaceful activity and our humble prayers be antidotes to wearisome worry and frenetic fancies so that we may, like the birds of the air and the lilies of the field, rest in who we already are and what we already have.

Wing our heartfelt concern to the homebound, to those facing death, to those who must undergo surgery, those living in the shadow of a threatening illness, and those who must live the best they can in a body that makes them daily mindful of the reality of pain. Be to us strength that we may strengthen others, be to us peace that we may be peacemakers, be to us love that we may love, be to us joy that we may be joyful. In the name of the Christ, Amen.