

Giving

Exodus 20:1-2, 17; Matthew 6:19-20, 24; Philippians 4:10-14

First Presbyterian Church

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Spiritual Practices Series

Exodus 20:1-2, 17

Then God spoke all these words: I am the LORD your God, who brought you out of the land of Egypt, out of the house of slavery;

You shall not covet your neighbor's house; you shall not covet your neighbor's wife, or male or female slave, or ox, or donkey, or anything that belongs to your neighbor.

Matthew 6:19-24

¹⁹“Do not store up for yourselves treasures on earth, where moth and rust consume and where thieves break in and steal; ²⁰but store up for yourselves treasures in heaven, where neither moth nor rust consumes and where thieves do not break in and steal. ²⁴“No one can serve two masters; for a slave will either hate the one and love the other or be devoted to the one and despise the other. You cannot serve God and wealth.

Philippians 4:10-14

¹⁰I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. ¹¹Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. ¹²I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. ¹³I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Sermon

Albert Klein was well into his 90's when I arrived at Springdale Church in Louisville. He was just about the last true farmer in a church that was founded in the 1880's as a "little church in the wildwood," but had long since become thoroughly suburban. "Mr. Albert," as folks called him, had been an elder and clerk of session, a deacon, a trustee, and served as Sunday school superintendent for decades. On any given Sunday there were four generations of Klein's sitting in that church's pews and there was little doubt in my young pastor's mind who the patriarch of the church was. Mr. Albert died at the age of 96... and as the original 1883 church building was still standing, the session decided to name it in his memory. We asked his family what we might write on the Klein Chapel memorial plaque. And they were unanimous that in addition to listing the many ways he had served the church, we would also include these words from Philippians, chapter 4: "I have learned to be content with whatever I have."

For his family and for his sisters and brothers in faith, these words of Paul became Mr. Albert's spiritual epitaph: I have learned to be content.

Contentment is the positive alternative to **coveting**. If greed and envy are the vices that God condemns, then contentment is the virtue God is calling us to practice. If coveting is a sign of the old life, then contentment is the promise of the new life God calls us into.

You may have seen the old cartoon frame showing an aerial view of four equally verdant cow pastures at the point where they all intersect. There is a cow in each of the four pastures, yet each cow is reaching through the fence to eat grass from their neighbor's field.¹ No caption is needed – the grass on the other side of the fence always appears a little greener. And it's not just cows, is it? Even a quick journey through Scripture reveals that the human spirit has always been covetous. Adam and Eve desire the fruit of the one tree denied them in the Garden of Eden. Cain wants Abel's easy approval from God. Jacob craves his brother, Esau's, birthright. Ahab pines for Naboth's vineyard. David lusts for Uriah's wife. James and John yearn for first place in the reign of God. It is into this world God speaks a word: "You shall not covet... anything that is your neighbors." And it is out of this world that Paul can honestly say: "I have learned to be content with whatever I have..."

Well, at the end of the day what both God and Paul are talking about is *desire*... coveting and contentment are about what we human beings *desire*. You may know there are some religions that have as their goal the extinguishing of desire... the making of people who are so detached from the world they no longer burn with need... they no longer desire for anyone or anything. Christianity is not like that. Our problem as humans is not that we desire... it's that we desire the wrong things... desire, when rightly channeled... rightly focused... is a good thing according to Scripture. OUR problem - as C.S. Lewis once said - is that "we are far too easily pleased."

What our hearts truly desire, says Tom Long, is to matter – to matter FOR something and to matter TO someone. To come to the end of the day – or the end of a life – with the satisfaction of having stood for what is good... with the joy of having been loved and having loved well in return, with the memory of having shown mercy... and with the peace of having walked with God.² The goal is not to extinguish our desire, but to bend that desire toward its perfect source and object... which, of course, is God. This is precisely what St. Augustine captured in his well-known words: "You have made us for yourself, O Lord, and our heart is restless until it rests in you." Our true desire is for God... to be loved by God and to love God in return... and though we are experts at trying to satisfy this large desire by taking countless small bites, we know that nothing in this world can so satisfy us... can so content us... as God can.

So how might we begin to stop being too easily pleased... how might we, like Mr. Albert, experience the deep contentment that comes with loving and being loved by God... how might the desires of our hearts even now be bent toward God?

¹ John Killinger in *To My People With Love – The Ten Commandments for Today*, Abingdon, 1988, p. 112.

² Thomas G. Long in *Matthew*, Westminster Bible Companion, WJK, 1997, p.74.

This is, of course, easier said than done, but I think a clue comes in Paul's words to the Philippians: "I have **learned**..." he writes. I have **learned** to be content with whatever I have. We cannot just will our way out of covetousness, we must learn it... it will not happen overnight, it will take practice... just like anything else we learn. So, in our few remaining minutes allow me to suggest two spiritual practices... two disciplines which I have found helpful in trying to allow God to bend MY restless heart toward God. One is a matter of **contemplation**... the other a matter of **action**... and let me say right now, neither of these comes naturally to me and neither is easy.³

The first practice is the *contemplation of death*... yes, the contemplation of death. Now before you tune me out, let me explain. When visiting an art museum, have you ever noticed the paintings of a saint or some other important person contemplating a skull? Well, in late medieval and Renaissance times, when artists wanted to represent someone who was seeking to bend away from this world, often they would paint them meditating in front of a skull. Why? Because they knew that by bringing to mind the reality of death, they might begin to put their lower desires in perspective. Of course, you and I do the same thing saying: "After all, you can't take it with you!" "Have you ever seen a hearse with a trailer hitch?" And surely, this is what Jesus was getting at when he spoke of rust and moth-eaten clothes and thieves ready to break in and steal. Friends, in a culture that largely hides the sights and smells and sounds of death, perhaps we might learn to be more content simply by remembering that we are dust, and to dust we shall return.

Now, leaving the path of contemplation and turning to the path of action, the second practice which God can use to bend our desires toward God is the ancient **practice of charity**... the ancient discipline of **giving away** some portion of what we have to others. Since this is a sermon on the practice of giving, you knew I would eventually get here... and this IS what God is asking all of us to do – whether you share with others through the ministry and mission of our church or some other way – this is what God is asking us to do... Because charity... the practice of giving... is one way to say that though money is the god of this world, it does not need to rule our hearts... though Mammon seems to drive this world, it is not what drives us... that we do not have to covet what is our neighbor's... that we CAN say "Enough is enough!" I have learned to be content. This is scary at first. At least that has been my experience as I have tried over the years to release more and more. But I also know that by offering to God what to many may seem like foolish amounts, our souls can be freed up to be content with all that we DO have.

Now, there's actually a *third practice* that is for me much more difficult to articulate, though it is certainly no less important. It is the practice of **replacing our lower loves with a higher love**. You and I can walk through a cemetery and "get" that the things of this world are temporary and can't really satisfy our deepest desire. We can give liberally, even foolishly, and find help to free our souls for the possibility of contentment. But we cannot NOT covet... at least I cannot NOT covet until my lower loves are replaced with a higher love... I can only be truly content when my love for the little things of this world is exchanged for a love for God.

³ Reno, p.208-210.

So, "If we are greedy," writes St. Augustine, "we should be greedy for eternal life. If we yearn, we should yearn for the life that has no end. THAT is where our greed and our yearning should stretch."

Yesterday, I had the honor of leading a very small memorial service for the family of Ken Farver. You may remember that Ken turned 100 last January... and I am so glad that happened before COVID so his birthday could be properly celebrated. Anyway, many of you might not have known Ken since once he stopped driving, he and Sarah couldn't get to church very often. And the whole reason I tell you this is that Ken reminded me so much of Mr. Albert. It's one of the greatest privileges of being a pastor, I get to meet and know these saints of the church – these men and women have faithfully followed Jesus... who have experienced the fullness of life – both the good times and the hard times... and who, in Paul's words, have "learned" to be content. Now, I realize that I met Mr. Albert and Ken Farver late in their lives and they may not have always been this way... and clearly, they had longer to learn this than most of us will have... but that's no reason you and I shouldn't get started... or shouldn't keep on learning to be content with whatever we have... because what we have is God's love... what we have is each other... what we have is what we truly need.