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Immanuel Lutheran Church, New York, NY
9/25/2016, The Nineteenth Sunday after Pentecost, Lectionary 26
Amos 6:1a, 4-7, 1 Timothy 6:6-19, Luke 16:19-31

In the name of the Father and of the ✠ Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.

Our Bible texts this morning speak with a united voice: From beginning to end they speak against greed and commend compassion. It is as if the prophet Amos, the Psalmist, St. Paul, and St. Luke all huddled together and resolved to tell us what was on the heart of each – indeed, what is on the very heart of God: Beware of greed, and pity the poor. Our Gospel story about Lazarus and the rich man especially reminds us of eternity. There is more to life than our threescore and ten years. There is more to the management of our money than the ebb and flow of our checkbook. Beyond the things of earth, there are also the things of heaven, and heaven *cares* about the poor and about whether we have been greedy in these years granted to us.

For a text, let's begin with the first line of our Epistle Lesson. St. Paul is writing to his younger colleague Timothy. The apostle says this:

There is great gain in godliness with contentment; (1
Timothy 6:6, RSV)

There are two good words here: “godliness” and “contentment.” Let's begin with one, and then add in the other, to see whether the second one gives us any new insight. So, for the moment, let's imagine that our verse simply goes this way:

There is great gain in... contentment.

I think many of us would say, Amen! to that. To be contented in life is a great thing. I've probably mentioned my son Sam's line to you before – the line about the plate. We have these plates at home. Each one has a painting of a quaint scene on it. The one I particularly like shows a cottage on a lake, with towering trees all around and flowers lining the edge of the cottage. Over supper once, I exclaimed that that is where I want to live when we retire. And Sam said, “You want to live on a plate?” Well, no, I do not want to live on a plate. But I would like to live in a cottage on a lake. Give me Carol, some books and some music and it looks like a contented place to me. Contentment is a good thing. There is great gain in contentment.

In one of Louise Penny's novels about Chief Inspector Armand Gamache, we encounter one of Gamache's superiors in rank. His last name is Brébeuf. Brébeuf is out to destroy Gamache. He has pretended to be Gamache's friend

throughout their careers, but in fact, he has plotted to destroy him. Why? Because he envies Gamache's contentment. In his billfold, Brébeuf carries a folded old piece of paper. On that paper, he has copied out a testimony supposedly written in AD 960 by someone named by Abd-er-Rahman the Third, of Spain. The old words go this way:

I have now reigned about fifty years in victory or peace, beloved by my subjects, dreaded by my enemies, and respected by my allies. Riches and honors, power and pleasure have waited on my call, nor does any earthly blessing appear to have been wanting. In this situation I have diligently numbered the days of pure and genuine happiness which have fallen to my lot: they amount to fourteen.

Fifty years reigning... fourteen days of happiness.

Brébeuf carefully refolds the paper, places it back in his wallet, and explains to Gamache why he has determined to destroy his old friend:

"All our lives I've been smarter, faster, better at tennis and hockey than you," said Brébeuf. "I got better grades and found love first. Had three sons. Five grandchildren to your one. I won seven commendations. How many have you?" Gamache shook his head. "You don't even know, do you? I beat you out for Superintendent and became your boss. I watched as you ruined your career. So why are you the happy one?"¹

Being a happy one, a contented one in this world, is notable. It might cause envy in a few, but for most people, it is attractive. We tend to like contented people. They give us hope that maybe contentment is possible for us too.

Let me press on a bit with praise of contented people. One of the good things about being contented is that you do not need to fear such a person. A contented person is not likely to rob you or murder you or undermine your plans or destroy your marriage or begrudge your successes. The contented person can let you live in peace -- can say "God bless you" and really mean it. The contented person has a sense of how precious life is, because life is precious to that one. The contented person can wake up each morning and be happy to face the morning sun. The contented person can lay his head down on the pillow at night, lay her head down, and say a prayer of gratitude for the

¹ Penny, Louise. *The Cruellest Month: A Chief Inspector Gamache Novel* (A Chief Inspector Gamache Mystery Book 3) (p. 292). St. Martin's Press. Kindle Edition.

day, even if it was an unremarkable day in the eyes of others. The contented person really is thankful on Thanksgiving Day. He dives into the turkey and mashed potatoes and pumpkin pie with gusto. The contented person is happy on Christmas Eve and loves to sing those Christmas carols, whether or not he is musical. Easter morning seems exactly right to the contented person: the happy shout that Jesus is risen fits with the contented person's sense that things are going to be okay.

Being content is rather a mystery on earth. There seems to be no particular rhyme or reason to it, *except* that Christians have reason to be content. You would think that being wealthy would make a person content. But stay with the wealthy a while, and it might prove otherwise. The well-to-do, after all, have their own worries and troubles, and having wealth does not guarantee contentment.

And you might think that being poor would deprive a person of contentment. But God be praised, that is not always so. There are many humble farms, lowly shacks, and tiny apartment buildings across our land, where if you were to knock on the door, you would enjoy meeting the one who answers, because that one is a happy person.

Contentment rather goes on its merry old way. Nothing can quite predict it: education, status, prospects, money – nothing seems to guarantee contentment, nor prevent it. But when we find a contented person, we tend to like that person. Contentment encourages us. Contentment answers a yearning in our souls – perhaps an ancient memory of Eden, perhaps a godly anticipation of heaven.

So, to return to our text thus far:

There is great gain in... contentment.

Contentment is not the same thing as laziness. Contentment does not give up striving. Rather, contentment is more akin to peace in the midst of struggle. Any Christian should take up the cross and follow Jesus, even though cross-bearing is hard. A *contented* Christian is willing to take up the cross and follow Jesus, with a peaceful confidence that Jesus will make all things good in the end.

Now, let's add in the second idea: godliness. When we do, we arrive at the verse the way the apostle actually wrote it to Timothy:

⁶There is great gain *in godliness* with contentment; (1 Timothy 6:6, RSV)

Godliness is good. Amen! No doubt about that. But godliness "with contentment" is even better. That is what St. Paul is commending to Timothy: that he strive for both godliness *and* contentment.

St. Paul does not want young Timothy to be a grim Christian. He does not want that for any of us. It is possible to be godly, yet restless, envious, unhappy, perhaps even bitter. And if there is no shaking of these unhappy emotions, then let us take up our cross and follow Jesus anyway. Let us strive to be godly people, even if we cannot be contented. And yet, maybe we could be a bit more contented in life if only we would try.

The particular adventure lifted up by this morning's readings has to do with charity to the poor. Amos, for example is furious because some of his people imagine that they can stretch themselves out in luxury, while they grieve not for those who live in ruins. The wealthy are contented, enjoying their couches and their beds of ivory and their rich food, but they do not have a godly contentment. Their contentment is ill-won, for it lacks compassion. It is not a godly happiness.

Our situation is different from that of the ancient Israelites. For us, our charity is institutionalized by way of our taxes. For us, a major part of our compassion on others is simply that we pay our taxes fair and square and be proud to contribute to the commonwealth that saves so many poor and vulnerable people in our land.

But throughout much of human history, the poor depended on the compassion of others, one by one. If the well-to-do do not help the lame man, the blind man, the sick and the elderly, then those poor souls are likely to perish.

So imagine that some wealthy ancient Israelite heeds the preaching of Amos and tries to mend his ways. He begins to give alms. He encourages others to do so. He pays his taxes and does not seek tax loopholes. He does all of these things, trying to be godly. And that is good. But if he is regretting it all inside, then there is an even better way awaiting him. It is the way of godliness *with contentment*.

Again, we can imagine Dives changing his ways concerning Lazarus at his gate. No longer does the wealthy man – he is called “Dives” in the tradition – no longer does Dives pass by Lazarus as if he does not even see him. Let us imagine that Dives makes it a new rule in his life to give alms to the poor. This is good. This benefits poor Lazarus. But it would benefit Dives too if he could be godly with contentment. Being godly, yet grim, is good, but there is a better way. I find I keep coming back to the wording of St. Paul in his introduction to his great Chapter 13 in his First Letter to the Corinthians. St. Paul says this: “And I will show you a still more excellent way” (1 Corinthians 12:31, RSV). The more excellent way is the way of love. Being godly, yet grim, is good. But let us ponder an even more excellent way: Let us be godly with love. Let us be godly, and not count the cost. Let us be godly, with contentment.

After all, we have received much in life. Whatever wealth we have, it comes from God, who could just have well deprived us of it, but did not. Whatever health we have, we have received from God. Whatever years are

left to us, they come from God's hand. And perhaps chief of all: Jesus counts you and me to be so important to him, that he died for us. He who was wealthy above all others, with the adoration of the very angels of heaven, made himself poor because he saw that we were poor, and he had compassion on us. The force of this morning's readings is to ask us to be like Jesus in his compassion on others. Let us be godly with contentment, not begrudging the cost, but rather trying to "fight the good fight of faith," as St. Paul puts it to Timothy, and trying be happy day by day *within* that good fight of faith, till Jesus comes again, to whom belongs the glory, with the Father and the Holy Spirit now and forever. Amen.