

“Look at This!”¹
Genesis 3:1-7, 1 Timothy 6:6-19
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Making Room for Generosity – Sermon I
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At the heart of the human condition lies a nagging discontent. Adam and Eve have everything they need, an abundant paradise filled with all sorts of exotic fruits and foods—until the serpent arrives and inflames that part of us that drives our discontent. Poet Charles Harper Webb says it like this:

The serpent didn't hiss
to Adam and Eve, "hide your nakedness!"
He wore his best suit, and whispered, "Look at this."²

Adam and Eve had access to everything in the garden save one thing, everything that they needed to thrive. Yet they had to have the one thing they didn't have.

The serpents have multiplied well beyond the imagination of Genesis. In the 1970s it was estimated that most of us were exposed to about 500 ads per day. Today's it's closer to 5,000.³ Look at this! We've created an entire culture based on that first disobedient act of wanting more, wanting what we don't yet have. That desire for more has fanned the nagging discontent deep within us that we try to soothe with things that just can't quite scratch the itch. But that doesn't stop us from trying. The average American now has a credit card debt of \$6,375 but when you look only at the group of people carrying credit card debt, the average rises to \$16,883. Look at this! College debt surpassed credit card debt for the first time recently, constricting the choices of young adults. Today 68% of bachelors degree recipients graduate with a debt load, averaged at more than \$30,000 per student.⁴ Look at this. And debt can be hazardous to your health. According to the Aspen Institute some 16% of suicides in the US – already the leading cause of death – occur in response to a financial problem.⁵ “The devil doesn't need to tempt you to do drugs or to steal or to have an extramarital affair in order to destroy you,” Adam Hamilton writes in his devotional book *Enough*. “All he needs to do is convince you to keep pursuing the American Dream—to keep up with the Joneses, borrow against

¹ I am grateful to the Rev. Dr. Joe Clifford, member of the Well preaching group, for the architecture and insights of this sermon series. Joe draws on *Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity* by Adam Hamilton.

² Charles Harper Webb. *Reading the Water*, (Northeastern: Boston, 1997,) p. 52.

³ <https://www.cbsnews.com/news/cutting-through-advertising-clutter/>. The most comprehensive study was actually published in 2006-2007. I found 2018 references to upwards of 10,000 ads per day.

⁴ <https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/personalfinance/2017/04/28/average-student-loan-debt-every-state/100893668/>

⁵ <https://www.aspeninstitute.org/blog-posts/hidden-costs-of-consumer-debt/>

your future, enjoy more than you can afford in the present, and indulge yourself. By doing that he will rob you of joy.”⁶ Look at this.

My normal sermonic instincts are to point out all of the macro-economic injustices that are at the root of the scarcity that so many of us are feeling. The fact that college costs have risen more than 100% over the last 30 years *after* adjusting for inflation.⁷ The fact that the tax cuts passed by last year’s Congress was exactly the wrong thing to do at a time when the economy was already firing on all cylinders. As interest rates rise to slow inflation, rapidly now because of the tax cuts, the very people who are already drowning in debt will have an even harder time paying off that debt. So once again the people in debt who need the most help are financing the wealth growth of those who were already living comfortably in the echelons.⁸ Look at this! The American Dream – a myth that runs our economy and some of our lives is, in fact, financially unobtainable to a great majority of American citizens by simple economics if you just do the math.⁹

But sometimes I wonder here at Brown Memorial – if our going immediately to the social analysis lets us too much off the hook; it takes the tension off of us to look at ourselves, and ask the question, what is at the root of my discontent? Where has the consumer ideology that we’re all swimming in drowned out the Gospel claims that there is enough for me and my neighbors in my life? Or if you are a glass half full kind of person you can ask it this way – where are the places in my life where I experience my life as gift, the gift to the world that God intends me to be? How can I magnify those places and minimize or even eliminate the places where life has become something else?

These are the central questions that we’re inviting you to examine in stewardship season. Not questions about pledges to church budgets – those come later. But the deeper question, are you spending your life in the way that honors it as a gift to you and God’s world? It’s the kind of question that undergirds this letter to Timothy, with the writer – maybe Paul, more likely a later disciple - making the observation that contentment is our natural state – “we brought nothing into this world,” the writer observes, “and we can take nothing out of it.” That gift based economy where there are enough basic resources to go around when we pay attention to our neighbors as much as we pay attention to ourselves. Our natural state that we, like Adam and Eve, continue to reject.

Contrary to American ideals, the writer of Timothy warns people about wanting to be rich. “Those who want to be rich fall into temptation and are trapped by many senseless and harmful desires that plunge people into ruin and

⁶ Hamilton, 22.

⁷ 129% for private colleges and 214% for public universities.

<https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/personalfinance/2017/04/28/average-student-loan-debt-every-state/100893668/>

⁸ “Your Credit Card will Pay for the Next Recession, *The New York Times*, Editorial Board, July 1, 2018. <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/07/01/opinion/credit-card-recession.html>

⁹<https://www.usatoday.com/story/money/personalfinance/2014/07/04/american-dream/11122015/>

destruction.” Greed leads people to ruin because it detaches gifts from their purpose. Yet the letter doesn’t call for material deprivation, just a reorientation to the natural gift of life which is the very thing that brings true joy, if we are attuned to it.

Hamilton’s book offers several keys for cultivating this kind of contentment. The first is an attitude of gratitude. I used to hate this kind of advice because telling someone who isn’t feeling grateful to have an “attitude of gratitude” seems terribly manipulative. Coming from a book in the Bible that encourages slaves to regard their masters as “worthy of all honor,” it would be easy to reject any advice from this book altogether. Coming at a time of immense city violence where Baltimore hasn’t had a weekend without a shooting in more than three years, calling for an attitude of gratitude can seem downright offensive. But these later books of the Bible can be helpful as windows into the Christian community’s response to the world when it hasn’t yet changed. How do we protect our spirit, our ideals, our vision when the world around us seems bent on crushing it?

When it comes to gratitude I’ve been with enough people in hard times to know that an attitude of gratitude often has little correlation with someone’s immediate circumstance. It is an attitude born out of practice, cultivated by habits of thanksgiving. I have prayed at the bedsides of people in immense pain who, when asked what they would like for me to pray for, have shocked me with the things like “for people who don’t have the privilege of this medical care; for people who are in worse pain than I am in.” An attitude of gratitude is real. It is not a retreat from our call to change the world. It gives us the fuel to be most powerful and available for that struggle.

Another key to contentment is realizing how good most of us have it. From an income standpoint, if you earn over \$32,400 a year, you are in world’s top 1% of wage earners.¹⁰ The majority of people in our world live in poverty; with 2.1 billion living on \$3 a day or less.¹¹ “We pray for you in America,” a Somali Christian shared with a US Christian not too long ago. “It’s hard for you to know the joy of true faith when you’ve never had to trust in God for anything.”

A 3rd key to contentment: consumer restraint. Hamilton advises us to develop the habit of asking ourselves how long this material item that I’m considering purchasing will make me happy. Several years ago I bought my first new car ever. I remember the feel of driving it off the lot. It was shiny and blue and sporty, though my children would disagree. But not a month after purchasing the vehicle I came out to the car where I had parked it in the lot to see that someone had hit me and driven off and left. A few weeks later, a child living in my house, who had not been taught properly how to use an ice scraper, scraped ice off the entire car, not just the windows, leaving lots of very artistically placed scratches. Suddenly the

¹⁰ <http://www.investopedia.com/articles/personal-finance/050615/are-you-top-one-percent-world.asp>

¹¹ https://www.actionagainsthunger.org/global-poverty-hunger-facts?gclid=Cj0KCQjw9afOBRDWARIsAJW4nvw_aLddr6ZueAcEmwvwwzfYtXKO1WN_EkGsvH7mtZip2mlgDUOKk9GrwaArv0EALw_wcB

new car seemed like way more of a burden than the car whose door I used to close with the kick of a foot.

And finally a 4th key: asking ourselves where does my soul find true satisfaction? Interestingly, when I ask myself that question, few resources are required. I find true satisfaction in my marriage, with my children, in my family, in this community and my pastoral calling and responsibilities. I find true satisfaction in delighting in the outdoors, breaking bread with good friends and new ones, in working with my hands, singing together, and most of all in communing with God through all these relationships.

None of these keys to contentment are substitutes for struggling for a world that is fairer: where resources are more equitably shared, where the poor and those who are numb to their plight both receive justice, the homeless are given home, the naked given clothing, those who are sick find healing, and we all find community. But while we struggle for that world, we are invited to begin living it, celebrating the parts of it that we've already been given. For most of us – not all – that means opening our eyes to the gifts we've already been given, reorienting our lives around the things that matter and give us the greatest purpose and fulfillment. Treading lighter on the world, taking less and giving more not because it is a burden but because it leads to real joy.

This is what Timothy wants us to look at. Not the shiny things we don't have, but the love that we do. Or, if you are a person who's been deprived of that kind of love, then the clarity to know that only love can fill that God-shaped hole in your life, love that is available right now to you.