

### **On Contentment**

One of the important questions that faces all of us at some point is the question “Am I content?” Do I have all I need or is there something beyond what I already have, that I need in order to be fulfilled? I think it is an important question to ponder during Lent.

In order to address this question, I think we should first consider what we already have. All we have to do is step outside in order to see that we have a lot. We have fertile soil, rich flora and fauna, fresh air, the color and contours of the land and the expansive sky to please the eye, refreshing pools of water. The words of Psalm 23 come to mind: “The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want.”

And when we come back inside, we find wood sawn into boards that provide us with walls, chairs, tables and combustible materials to provide us with heat. We have basic shelter and food thanks to the hard work of others, but ultimately thanks to the providence of God.

We also have a community with whom we can share laughter, work and love. And we have minds and hearts, capable of creativity and of appreciation. Although each one of us is no more than a tiny grain of sand in the greater scheme of things, God has instilled in us the ability to wonder at the breadth of the universe and connect us with it all. We have a lot.

### **The Garden of Eden**

The first reading this morning, with its focus on the eating of the apple in the Garden of Eden, helps us to think about this question. Do I have all I need to be content or do I need more? It is in many ways a story about a couple who were not content with the limits placed on them by God and about what may happen when, out of the desire for more, we ignore those limits.

### **The Cookie Jar**

I like to compare the story to those times in childhood, when Mom baked up a fresh batch of cookies, put them in the cookie jar and said, “ Don’t eat these cookies. There are plenty of other snacks in the fridge.” But these are not for you.”

Mom has plans for those cookies and her instructions are part of how she maintains a wholesome and orderly environment in

the household, all the while amply providing for the needs of her children. In turn, the children are capability of recognizing the wisdom in following her instructions or ignoring them and eating the cookies anyway.

The cookies are my equivalent to the apples on the tree of the knowledge of good and evil, in the Garden of Eden. And the temptation for the kids, as they stand in front of the cookie jar, is to say “I’m going to take over Mom’s role of deciding what can and can’t happen here, and I’m going to have a cookie. Because everything about these cookies smells and looks very good to me and I really want to know what they taste like.”

And when they eat the cookies, or in the case of Adam and Eve, when they eat the apple, they have their first experience of defiance. They have rejected a world designed to provide them with abundance and freedom, but with limits. They have entered into a new reality where, if they can keep the secret from Mom, they are now free to ignore the rules of her benevolent household and follow their own designs and preferences.

And so, as is the case in the garden, the first half of the serpent's prediction comes true. In eating the apple, Adam and Eve have made themselves into their own Gods. But that does not mean God has disappeared. God is still there. (Mom is still there). And in secretly breaking trust with him, they come to the knowledge of good and evil and they come face to face with God's warning that if they eat from the tree, they will die.

"Goodness" and "life", in the Bible always come as a result of being aligned with the will of God. As John the Baptist would say, "make a straight path" of yourself, so that God's love can flow easily through you to water the world. Goodness and life come from being content to enjoy the fruits of living in the garden, engaging in the work of tilling and caring for it, but staying within the limits God sets, so that we may thrive and not die.

Evil, on the other hand, is what happens when we separate ourselves from God by choosing instead a world of limitless possibility; where we become our own Gods. Where our own appetites and desires guide us and God's instructions are ignored or forgotten. We become like the lost sheep who, in following a trail of tasty grass, wanders from the flock and gets

lost. Suddenly he looks up and it is night and the wolves are circling.

### **Application for Today**

It seems to me that this story is a clear warning to us about the way we are living in the world today. God has given us a planet that is literally a beautiful garden, rich with beauty and resources for our enjoyment. We have everything we need.

But it seems that, rather than till and care for it as an expression of our sharing in the work of God's benevolent household. We behave as though we are ravenous creatures in a barren wilderness who have to fend for ourselves. And rather than live in accordance with the limits God has put on us for our own benefit, we are hungrily eating the apple. We are making the most of our time to cast aside all limitation in order to be as God-like as possible.

I say we, because I too desire to be God-like. I want to be able to turn on electric lights after the sun goes down. I want to be able to travel long distances in a short time. I want clean water available at a moment's notice. I want my home to retain a comfortable internal temperature, year round. I think we call it

“progress.” And I like the benefits of progress and the way it makes my limitations seem to disappear.

### **Progress**

But in the midst of this euphoria, it is worth considering that the life that we consider normal and good today, is a life that for most of history would have been considered a fantasy. How could the generations before us imagine the reality we live in, where a person can create or extinguish light at the flick of the finger or travel across a continent in a single day. Only a divine being could do such things.

But in our more sober moments, we recognize that what we call progress also has ominous consequences. On the one hand, medical advances have led to the alleviation of tremendous pain and to longer healthier lives. But these very advances are also partially responsible for a population explosion that is putting overwhelming stress on the earth, our garden.

The internet has led to a global network of communication and tremendous efficiencies. At the same time it is drowning our minds in an ocean of entertainment that appeals to our basest

instincts. The more God-like we make ourselves, the closer we come to destroying ourselves by ignoring the consequences.

And so I don't know how I feel about what we call progress. I feel caught between God's words to Adam and Eve, "If you eat of this tree, you shall die" and the lie of the serpent, that "You will not die. You will be like God."

And as we face a winter in which the local temperature was 9 degrees above average, the warmest winter since local record keeping began; as we hear about unusual flooding, wildfires, increasingly devastating hurricane seasons, I wonder how sustainable this "god-like existence" that we have created for ourselves really is.

It seems to me that we are seeing the consequences of our failure to be content with the deal God presented us with when he created us and put us in the garden. We don't want to till it in God's way, we want to have it our way. And so, ironically, we are busily banishing ourselves from the garden by turning it into a desert.

## **The Temptation of Jesus**

When we turn to the Gospel reading and the story of Jesus's temptation in the wilderness, we find certain similarities with what happened in the Garden but a different response. Here it is the devil who plays the role of "tempter."

Over and over, the devil tries to tempt Jesus to transcend human limits. Create food from stones. Defy the law of gravity, claim all riches. And each time the fully human and fully divine Jesus, refuses to be tempted. He chooses to stay within human limits and to make his own needs secondary to "every word that comes from the mouth of God". And he does this in spite of the fact that he has famished, alone and has been exposed in the wilderness for forty days.

## **Life: Sunrise to Sunset**

I've been thinking a lot about limitations in a lot of different ways lately. I'm thinking about how placing limits on myself can be a spiritual discipline. I'm also thinking about how I can limit my rather large environmental "footprint." And if you are over 60 then like me, you are thinking about how to deal with the increasing limitations on what your body and mind can do.



It seems to me that, if a person is fortunate enough to live a full life, that it will follow a course similar to the way the sun passes through the sky. During the first half of the day the sun grows in power and ascends to its heights. I think of this as the phase when “more is more” tends to be the way we look at life.

But then the second half of the day begins and the sun goes into decline. It is no less wonderful a phase. But what has to take over is what I think of as the “less is more” understanding of life.

I don't think we have a choice as to whether we accept this view, because our limitations are going to increase, whether we like it or not. So it seems that the choice is either to be forever disappointed with less and less or to accept it and look for the silver lining a spirituality that can grow within, when all else is failing.

I'm not sure that I have been able to accept it yet. I still have a bucket list of places to go and things I wish to experience. My love is for travel and I still fervently wish to go around the world two or three times before I die.

But when I look at the bank account, at my obligations and at my slowly increasing physical limitations, not to mention what air travel is doing to the atmosphere, I realize that some downsizing of expectations is in order. As much as technology has giving me a God-like existence up to this point, I cannot finally escape the limitations that God has placed on my life.

So that perhaps I need to give more of myself to the “less is more” approach; to stop thinking that there are things that I don’t have that I still have to get. Perhaps I need to stop thinking that I should have more of what God never promised me in the first place, and devote more of myself to appreciating what is already available to me here and now.

Perhaps, if I really do this, then Jesus will spit in his hand, rub it on my eyes, so that the scales can fall away and I can see more of the garden and less of the wilderness.

### **It is called Contentment**

And so, in a roundabout way, we come back to the question of “contentment.” In this world continually based on striving for more ways to be God-like, I think one of the things we can do is

serve God by being content with what looks like very little to some, but is a great deal to us.

Let other people drive themselves insane with trying to be God-like through the endless game of adding the fancy bells and whistles that technology has brought us – things like twitter, facebook, on-line shopping, 24 hour television, bigger houses, faster cars. It seems to me that we are no happier with them than we were when I was a boy and none of these things existed.

In fact, a certain contentment and gratitude comes over me when I realize that, I don't care to know and I don't need to know about the technologies that will come out after I'm gone. Maybe people will be flying around in jet jackets or something. So what? I don't envy them at all. The parameters of my life are all the blessing I need. Perhaps part of you feels the same way too.

Lent is a good time to discover how to be truly content with limits and to experience how this can draw us closer to God.