

“Happy Enough”
Philippians 4:4-13

I was always taught that a preacher should begin with a Biblical text out of which a sermon grows and not to begin with a sermon that goes in search for a text to support it. I have a confession to make. The genesis of this morning's sermon comes from two essays that do not come from the Bible, but the reading from Philippians is one of several passages that support it.

The first essay is one I heard last June while listening to *All Things Considered*, the late afternoon news program on National Public Radio. It's from a series called, "This I Believe," in which people from all walks of life are invited to express their varied beliefs.ⁱ

I've always believed that one of the reasons so many marriages fail is that so many people are looking for the perfect spouse and the perfect marriage. So my ears perked up when I heard Corinne Colbert, a journalist by trade, read her essay...

A Marriage That's Good enough
by Corinne Colbert
All Things Considered, 6/4/07 National Public Radio

My husband is not my best friend. He doesn't complete me. In fact, he can be a self-absorbed jerk. We're nearly polar opposites: He's a lifetime member of the NRA who doesn't care for journalists, and I'm a lifelong liberal with a journalism degree. On the other hand, he doesn't beat or emotionally abuse me. He doesn't drink or chase other women. He's a good provider. So I'm sticking with him. Some people would call that "settling," like it's a bad thing. But I believe in settling.

The Random House Unabridged Dictionary defines "to settle" as "to place in a desired state or order; to quiet, calm or bring to rest; to make stable." In short, it means that a bird in the hand is worth two in the bush.

Alas, too many of us buy into a different adage: that the grass is greener on the other side of the fence. From movies to magazines to commercials, we're told we should demand more from lives that are, for many of us, pretty good. We're supposed to look better, eat better, find better jobs, be better lovers and parents and workers. A stable marriage isn't enough; it's supposed to be a fairy tale. Perfection is the goal.

But at what cost? Would I really be any happier if I took up yoga and ate more soy? If my spouse wasn't just my partner, but also was my soul mate? I doubt it.

Settling, in my sense, is about acceptance. I'm a pretty happy person, in large part because I'm honest with myself about what I have. My body isn't bikini-worthy, but

it's healthy. I'll never write for *Rolling Stone* as I once dreamed, but I am making a living as a writer. I yell at my sons and let them play too much GameCube, but I'm still a good mom.

Of course, some situations are worth improving. If your weight jeopardizes your health, exercise and change your eating habits. If your job makes you truly miserable, find a new one. If your marriage is toxic, end it. Chances are, though, you probably have what you need: a roof over your head, food on the table, a job that pays the bills, and family and friends. If you're unhappy, ask yourself: Am I unhappy because I really don't have what I need, or because I just want more?

So, yes, I'm settling. Sure, I wish my husband would kiss me more often, tell me he loves me every day, and get as excited about my accomplishments as I do. Emptying the dishwasher without being asked and giving me unsolicited foot massages wouldn't hurt, either.

All that would be nice, but it's not necessary. I'm happy with my husband who, despite his flaws, is a caring father, capable of acts of stunning generosity and fiercely protective of his family. Thinking about him may not set me on fire as it used to, but after 17 years and two kids, our love is still warm. And I believe that's good enough.

The other essay is by Howard Forster who shared it with me a few weeks ago. I've asked him to read, *Happiness Is a State of Mind...*

Happiness Is a State of Mind

by Howard Forster

Our outlook on life is a great determining factor in all that we say and do. One of the most important lessons that we must learn is that we should concentrate and concern ourselves only with those things we can change, and train ourselves not to worry about those things that we cannot change. Through God all things are possible.

Are we not blessed? Every morning as we start a new day, are we not awed by the countless blessings that God has provided for us? We are so quick to worry about all of the things that are wrong, and not concentrate on all of the things that are right. The average person takes for granted the many blessings that are a daily part of our lives such as good health, lack of physical and mental disabilities, good homes, good families, good education, good jobs, the privilege to live in a free environment where we can believe and worship as we wish, and so on. Instead we focus on most of the negative aspects of our lives, and in so doing place far more importance on these things than they truly deserve.

Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could expend some of this negative energy in a different way, and start thinking more about others. If we could do this, and further act upon responding to some of the more serious needs of others as we see them, God can and will provide us with a personal peace and satisfaction beyond description.

Be positive, think good thoughts, do good deeds, walk in the path of God and the world will take on new dimensions for you.

It's hard to argue with those words, but in our society, happiness is too often defined as being perfect and having more, not of what we need but of what we want.

ITEM: Chances are the annual picture of your son or daughter taken at your local elementary school is not what it appears to be. An increasing number of photo agencies now offer retouching services that allow students to wipe out their every imperfection and parents are buying into it. "It surprises me ... when a mom comes in and asks for retouching on a second grader," says one photographer. "I have a 12-year-old, and I'd be afraid that if I asked for retouching she'd think she wasn't good enough."ⁱⁱ

ITEM: The current issue of Psychology Today features an article describing the disastrous effects when parents demand perfection from their children in school. "Perfectionism ... keeps people from engaging in challenging experiences; they don't get to discover what they truly like or to create their own identities. Perfectionism reduces playfulness and the assimilation of knowledge; if you're always focused on your own performance and on defending yourself, you can't focus on learning a task."ⁱⁱⁱ The same article refers to studies of the "debilitating effects on athletes of anxiety over perfect performance ... Over concern about mistakes orients them to failure."

ITEM: Jerome Wakefield, a professor at New York University, finds more and more students coming to him after a break up with a boyfriend or girlfriend, not because they are so sad they feel the need for therapy, but because their parents are pressuring them to seek counseling and maybe even a little Zoloft for their sadness. "Kids want no part of it," he says in his book, "The Loss of Sadness: How Psychiatry Transformed Normal Sorrow Into Depressive Disorder." Eric Wilson, a professor at Wake Forest University has published a book, "Against Happiness," in which he argues that "Americans' fixation on happiness fosters a craven disregard for the value of sadness and its integral place in the great rhythm of the cosmos."^{iv} Surely we don't want to ignore the possibly tragic consequences of clinical depression, but sadness is not a disease and may well be the most appropriate emotion given the circumstance of our lives.

ITEM: Jess Hinds was only 25 when her father died at the age of 58. Her deep grief was understandable and to be expected except in a society that wants mourners to snap out of it and return to a happier life. She writes,

Why don't people say 'I am sorry for your loss' anymore? Why don't people accept that after a parent's death, there will be years of grief? ... People seem to worry that if

they encourage me to grieve openly, I will fall apart. I won't. On the contrary, if you allow me to be sad, I will be a stronger, more effective person. On the day of my father's funeral, we were greeted by a grinning deacon who shook our hands and chirped, 'Isn't it a beautiful day? I'm so glad you have sun for your memorial!' I wanted to shake this woman. Couldn't she invoke a solemn tone for at least five seconds on the darkest morning of my life?^v

The pursuit of "the perfect," whether it be in ourselves, our marriages, our children, our families, our jobs, our church, our nation, our world is demonic. No wonder we're unhappy! Wait a minute you might say. Didn't we hear St. Paul say, **"if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things?"**^{vi} Indeed, we did, but excellence is not about being perfect. Excellence is about giving it your best shot, even if your best shot is only good enough, or not even good enough. "Excellence involves enjoying what you're doing, feeling good about what you've learned, and developing confidence. Perfection involves feeling bad about a 98 and always finding mistakes no matter how well you're doing."^{vii}

And with all due respect to Thomas Jefferson, the pursuit of happiness is an illusion. Nathaniel Hawthorne saw it more clearly: "Happiness in this world, when it comes, comes incidentally. Make it the object of pursuit, and it leads us on a wild- goose chase, and is never attained. Follow some other object, and very possibly we may find that we have caught happiness without dreaming of it." "Happiness," someone else said, "is like a butterfly. The more you pursue it, the more it eludes you."

One day Jesus looked out upon a great crowd of people. **"He had compassion for them, because they were harassed and helpless, like sheep without a shepherd."**^{viii}

"Why spend money on what does not satisfy?" asked the prophet. **"Why spend your wages and still be hungry? Listen to me and do what I say, and you will enjoy the best food of all."**^{ix}

What do we need to hear? What do we need to learn? Listen to a portion of Psalm 4 - **"Why is everyone hungry for more? 'More, more,' they say. 'More, more.' I have God's more-than-enough, more joy in one ordinary day than they get in all their shopping sprees. At day's end I'm ready for sound sleep, for you, God, have put my life back together."**^x

So, St. Paul could write, **"I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I 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. I can do all things through him who strengthens me."**^{xi}

Sometimes people take that last sentence out of context, implying that if you just buck up and put your shoulder to the wheel you can do anything you want to do and have anything you want to have - **"through him who strengthens me."** *The Message* is a bit more helpful: **"Whatever I have, wherever I am, I can make it through anything in the One who makes me who I am."** I can make it through anything - in plenty and in want, in sickness and in health, in joy and in sorrow, and

even in death – I can make it through the One who makes me who I am!

Real contentment is found is being “who I am” – not in being who others want me to be, not in being some idealistic image of myself, not in wanting what my neighbor has, not in being perfect, not in being blissfully happy, but in being “who I am” and trusting the God whose **“grace is sufficient for [us],”** and whose **“power is made perfect in weakness.”**^{xii} For this pilgrim, that’s happy enough!

-
- i. The essays may be found at www.thisIbelieve.org
 - ii. “Say ‘Cheese!’ And Now Say ‘Airbrush!’”, Jessica Bennett, Newsweek, February 25, 2008, p. 10
 - iii. *The Making of a Perfectionist*, by Hara Estroff Marano, Psychology Today, April 2008, p. 82
 - iv. Newsweek, February 11, 2008, pp 50-52
 - v. “‘I’m Sorry’ Shouldn’t Be the Hardest Words,” by Jess Decourcy Hinds, Newsweek, August 21, 2007
 - vi. Philippians 4:8
 - vii. Psychology Today, p. 85
 - viii. Matthew 9:36
 - ix. Isaiah 55:2, *Good News Bible*
 - x. Psalm 4:6-8, *The Message*
 - xi. Philippians 4:11-13
 - xii. See 2 Corinthians 12:9