

Suttons Bay Congregational Church
1 Timothy 6:6-19 *One Hundred Four and Another in the Mail*

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One hundred four and another in the mail. That's how many pairs of shoes I have. That's two hundred ten individual shoes. That's more than a quarter of the number of shoes the Guinness Book of World Records millipede with the largest number of feet—750—needs, if millipedes needed shoes. Sneakers, flats, heels, loafers, sandals, boots, and even tap shoes—so many shoes and only two feet upon which to wear them. Until I counted them in preparation for this sermon on contentment, I would have guessed I have half that many shoes. It's likely I have enough shoes that, should I live an average life span, I would never have to purchase another pair. I like shoes so much but, as the author of First Timothy makes painfully clear in today's scripture passage "we brought nothing into the world, so that we can take nothing out of it." Someone who wears size 8 women's shoes is gonna hit pay dirt when I die.

I'm not telling you anything you don't know. You know you can't take it with you when you go. But some of it's just so fun in the here and now, isn't it? My shoes entertain me and brighten my day. Yes, I have too many of them and I'm going to give some away because I understand, mostly, that my shoes do not define me, and while they entertain me, they don't bring me a sense of contentment.

The true source of contentment is what the Apostle Paul writes about in his letter to Timothy. However, contrary to what some folks might take away from this passage with an initial reading, these verses are not a blanket condemnation of material wealth. Indeed, according to a commentator on the passage, "It is inappropriate to affirm in a wholesale fashion that early Christians criticized material wealth. Rather, of crucial importance is the attitude of the person owning it. Material wealth can get in the way of putting one's trust in God, and it can be a hindrance to following Jesus (Mark 10:17-22). . . Therefore, those who have riches 'are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.'" (1 Timothy 6:18-19).¹

The core of the message has to do with resisting society's message that material wealth is that which finally leads to contentment. It is not. The constant striving for more material wealth is often that which distracts us on our spiritual journey. Paul wishes that, "if we have food and clothing, we will be content with these." Or, as another translation expresses, that each of us, having the basic material necessities in life, will have "a mind contented with its lot." Because, in the end, our stuff does very little for us when we're in the midst of a spiritual, emotional, or health crisis. After all, rich or poor, old or young, book smart or street smart, every patient in the hospital wears those ugly, bulky no-slip socks. Crisis is the great equalizer and while financial resources make weathering a storm easier, they do not keep the storm from coming. No matter how fast the car, big the boat, fancy the house, or stylish the shoes, none of these are the things that ultimately have the power to save us or make us feel truly content. We know this and the Apostle Paul knows it and suggests that as long as we have clothes and food, we can be content because the striving to do or have more often leads to ongoing discontent and disillusionment in life. And, I argue, constantly wanting more gets in the way of appreciating and being grateful for what we already are and what we already have.

To illustrate the point, I invite you to hear the story of the discontented stone cutter as found in *The Discipline of Transcendence – Discourses on the forty-two sutras of Buddha*.

There was once a stone cutter who was dissatisfied with himself and with his position in life.

¹ https://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=1770

One day he passed a wealthy merchant's house. Through the open gateway, he saw many fine possessions and important visitors. "How powerful that merchant must be!" thought the stone cutter. He became very envious and wished that he could be like the merchant.

To his great surprise, he suddenly became the merchant, enjoying more luxuries and power than he had ever imagined, but envied and detested by those less wealthy than himself. Soon a high official passed by, carried in a sedan chair, accompanied by attendants and escorted by soldiers beating gongs. Everyone, no matter how wealthy, had to bow low before the procession. "How powerful that official is!" he thought. "I wish that I could be a high official!"

Then he became the high official, carried everywhere in his embroidered sedan chair, feared and hated by the people all around. It was a hot summer day, so the official felt very uncomfortable in the sticky sedan chair. He looked up at the sun. It shone proudly in the sky, unaffected by his presence. "How powerful the sun is!" he thought. "I wish that I could be the sun!"

Then he became the sun, shining fiercely down on everyone, scorching the fields, cursed by the farmers and laborers. But a huge black cloud moved between him and the earth, so that his light could no longer shine on everything below. "How powerful that storm cloud is!" he thought. "I wish that I could be a cloud!"

Then he became the cloud, flooding the fields and villages, shouted at by everyone. But soon he found that he was being pushed away by some great force, and realized that it was the wind. "How powerful it is!" he thought. "I wish that I could be the wind!"

Then he became the wind, blowing tiles off the roofs of houses, uprooting trees, feared and hated by all below him. But after a while, he ran up against something that would not move, no matter how forcefully he blew against it – a huge, towering rock. "How powerful that rock is!" he thought. "I wish that I could be a rock!"

Then he became the rock, more powerful than anything else on earth. But as he stood there, he heard the sound of a hammer pounding a chisel into the hard surface, and felt himself being changed. "What could be more powerful than I, the rock?" he thought.

He looked down and saw far below him the figure of a stone cutter.²

Have you had a similar kind of experience when you've compared yourself to another and found yourself lacking because you had lost sight of the value and worth you already possessed?

A few weeks ago in our Articles of Faith adult education group, we read and discussed an article called *Satisfaction in the Age of Greed*. In it the writer, a clergy person and author at *The Christian Century*, writes about how inadequate she felt when she was trying to put her bumper back in place on her old beater car in a parking lot when she noticed a woman in a fancy Beemer and movie star sunglasses beside her. When she apologized for being in the lady's way, the lady ignored her. The author writes about how that made her feel.

I feel a tiny wither of humiliation. *Do we ever grow out of middle school?*

I sigh. *We are equals*, I tell myself, even though I don't know anything about the woman except that she drives a nice car. She could have won a Nobel Peace Prize last year. But I continue, *I am*

² Osho, *The Discipline of Transcendence – Discourses on the forty-two sutras of Buddha*, Vol 2, Ch 2, Q 1 (excerpt)

smart. I am creative. I am productive. I have written books. I teach graduate classes. People pay money to listen to me speak. I just didn't choose a lucrative profession. I could have. But I don't care about money. I am SO above money. And I continue to self-soothe with those words running through my head, like a fourteen-year-old girl who still sucks her thumb while going to sleep.”³

I'm guessing many of us have had similar feelings when we, like the author and the stonecutter, compare ourselves to others and find ourselves lacking. We, too, know the sense of discontent doing this can bring. But, the reason I share the article this morning is not just because most of us can relate to it, but because of the back story that goes along with it.

The author of the article, Carol Howard Merritt, is a friend of mine. When we lived in Rhode Island, Carol pastored the Presbyterian Church just down the street from the church where I served. I helped her and her husband clean up their basement in the wee small hours of the morning after a flood and she and her husband packed up our kitchen for us when we were preparing to move to Michigan. We were friends like that—we saw each other through the good, the bad, and the ugly. Since our years in Rhode Island, Carol has become well-known in church-nerd circles. (I proudly count myself among this group of esteemed colleagues.) She is a published author and a regular columnist for the leading periodical in our trade. Just this past week she won a distinguished alumni award from her seminary. And, she has fabulous hair. I don't think the woman has ever had a bad hair day. But here's the thing about this article about her feeling discontent in the face of another's wealth—I feel discontent in the face of Carol's success! I sometimes feel about Carol the way I imagine Carol felt about the lady in the fancy car. When I read her latest book or article I say to myself the same kinds of things Carol said to herself in the car that day. “I am smart. I am creative. I am productive. I serve a congregation of inspiring and generous people. I have the finest corgi in all the land. My kid is great. I am married to the most handsome chiropractor in Leelanau County. I am good enough. I am smart enough. And doggone it, people like me!”

Comparing myself to Carol leaves me feeling anything but content. Which is stupid. I love Carol and I miss Carol and I know that, if I called on her all these years later in a time of need, she would do whatever she could to help and I would do the same for her. Carol isn't the problem. I am. If I just consider what I have and what I am and who I get to love and be loved by in this world, I am content beyond all imagination.

And it is that kind of gratitude that brings a sense of contentment, it is the peace that passes understanding, the peace of Christ . . . a sense of contentment that ultimately is not based in what we have, but rather in *WHOSE* we are—and that, my friends, is, as the Apostle Paul put it, “taking hold of the life that is truly life.”

³ <https://www.christiancentury.org/blog-post/born-again-again/satisfaction-age-greed>

