

## CONTENT AND DISCONTENT

<sup>4</sup>Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. <sup>5</sup>Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. <sup>6</sup>Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. <sup>7</sup>And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. <sup>8</sup>Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. <sup>9</sup>Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you. <sup>10</sup>I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. <sup>11</sup>Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. <sup>12</sup>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. <sup>13</sup>I can do all things through him who strengthens me.  
(Philippians 4:4-13, NRSV)

In the 1970's Long Islander Billy Joel wrote the song, "Angry Young Man." In part the lyrics read:

*And there's always a place for the angry young man,  
With his fist in the air and his head in the sand.*

*And he's never been able to learn from mistakes,  
So he can't understand why his heart always breaks  
(Turnstiles).*

In the last line of the song we learn that, “He'll go to the grave as an angry old man” (Ibid.) We've probably all known people like this. Some of us may have even been this person at one point in our lives, but hopefully we pulled our heads out of the sand and learned to deal with our anger.

I did a memorial service recently for someone who had every reason to be angry from an early age. And yet this person rose above the temptation of resentment and was a joy to be around. I'm talking, of course, about Edie Van Riper-Haase. Tragedy struck when Edie was a small child—her mother died. In 1956 Edie married Doug Van Riper, who unfortunately died of a massive heart attack in 1974 leaving her with two children. Instead of feeling sorry for herself, Edie rolled up her sleeves, got her broker's license and took over the family real estate business. In 1986 Edie married George Haase, who underwent a heart transplant in 2002. Edie's daughter underwent a battle with cancer in 2002 as well. Both recovered and are in good health today. That same year Edie was diagnosed with cancer. She faced every treatment bravely with a smile on her face. Even with a terminal diagnosis Edie kept her head up. She decided to face death on *her* terms and did just that, planning her own memorial service. Edie never gave up, never quit, and never ceased to amaze me with her glowing attitude and heroic courage. Edie had learned the importance of acceptance and contentment. She knew that often we cannot control the challenges that life throws at us. We can, however, control how we choose to respond to life's challenges. Will we bury our heads in the sand and raise our fists like Billy Joel's angry young man or will we face each challenge with courage and grace like Edie?

The Apostle Paul knew this struggle first-hand. He learned it along the rocky road of his itinerant ministry. Paul wrote the following words to the church in Philippi, which Serena read for us a few minutes ago: “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 Christ who strengthens me” (4:11b-13).

Early in life, Paul knew privilege. He was educated at the finest schools and became a rising star in the ranks of the ultra-religious Pharisees. But he left that life behind when he converted to Christianity. Where previously Paul had led a sheltered life, his new passion for Christ meant being beaten and thrown in jail. Where in the past Paul got the royal treatment from his fellow Pharisees, now Paul got run out of town on a regular basis and was eventually beheaded in Rome. And yet here’s a man who writes from a jail cell about being content.

Paul learned how to count his blessings when his ministry bore fruit, when he was housed and well fed, and Paul learned how to still count himself lucky when he was lying in a dingy jail cell with a rusty cup of water. Paul’s secret was his faith. In his heart, he knew that he was doing God’s work and that his life was forever held in the palm of God’s hand. Paul’s faith gave him strength to face the good times and the bad times, knowing that when all was said and done, God had the last word.

The Pilgrims of Plymouth knew how to rely on their faith and lean on God in difficult times. Life was not easy for them before ever coming to the new world. After all, their persecution in England led to the trip in the first place. If they had any illusions that life would improve once they left England, they must have been sorely disappointed.

During their first winter in the New World half of them died. At one time things got so bad that only seven of them were healthy enough to take care of the rest who were all sick. Enduring famine and blizzards, disease and death must have made them wonder if they wouldn't have been better off never making the trip. And yet when spring arrived help came in the form of a friendly Native American tribe who taught the Pilgrims to fish, hunt, and grow suitable crops. After summer passed and they experienced a bountiful harvest, the Pilgrims didn't receive it glumly, still grumbling about all of the difficulties they'd endured. Instead they received the food as a blessing from God and responded with an enormous feast of *thanks*-giving.

While the gift of contentment can serve us well in life, sometimes we need a dose of discontentment. No doubt Jesus was discontent when in anger he drove the moneychangers out of the Temple. In his book *Strength to Love*, Nobel Peace Prize winner and Civil Rights leader, Martin Luther King, Jr., wrote, "Human salvation lies in the hands of the creatively maladjusted." The same is true of the creatively discontent, people who fight complacency, cynicism, and conformity.

Would slavery in America have ended in the 1860's if Abraham Lincoln had been content with the status quo? Would women have earned the right to vote without decades of struggle? After all, it was "In July of 1848 that Elizabeth Cady Stanton and Lucretia Mott organized the first women's rights convention in Seneca Falls, NY, and launched the women's suffrage movement"

([www.archives.gov/digital\\_classroom/lessons/woman\\_suffrage/resolution](http://www.archives.gov/digital_classroom/lessons/woman_suffrage/resolution)). However, it was not until 1920 that the 19<sup>th</sup> amendment became law. Our world needs people who are discontent with life's inequities and willing to move humanity in a positive direction. The challenge is in being discontent with the

status quo while at the same time finding peace in one's heart and life.

We need this same grace as we age. One of our church's most prominent poets-in-residence, Marie Lafrenz, handed me her latest poem last week. It reads:

*Now that I'm fast approaching 92  
I think of all the things I used to do  
Of riding, driving, swimming and all the rest  
And reading, that's the thing I liked the best  
But when I long too much for yesterday  
I've learned to turn and look the other way  
At loving family, friends, all of that  
Good health, my church, my home, my cat  
And then I realize I should pray  
To thank God for the gifts I have today.*

Marie is right on target and in good company with the Apostle Paul and our spiritual ancestors, the Pilgrims. No matter how challenging life gets, we can always find a reason to give thanks. As we gather around the Thanksgiving table this week, let us each in our own way with hearts and hands and voices, "Praise God from whom *all* blessings flow." AMEN.

Written by Rev. Jimmy Only  
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The Congregational Church of Manhasset, New York (UCC)

## PASTORAL PRAYER

Loving God, giver of all good, who continually pours your benefits upon us, we praise you for the order and constancy of nature; for the beauty and bounty of the earth; for day and night, summer and winter, seedtime and harvest; and for the varied splendor of each season. We give you thanks for the comfort and joy of life, for our neighborhoods and our homes, for our families and our friends, and especially for our country where we can be free to live as we see fit.

We offer our humble hearts to you O God, Creator, Redeemer, Sustainer, through Jesus Christ our Lord.  
AMEN.

(Portions of this prayer were adapted from *Book of Worship: United Church of Christ*, p. 534)