

THREE SERMONS ON SNARES OF THE DEVIL

1. CONTENTMENT

Pilgrim Church, Duluth

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Recently the newsletter of a local Kiwanis club had an item about a young minister in the Kentucky hills. He noted that a very faithful older woman in his parish had not been coming to worship. He called on the woman and asked why she had not been coming.

"Son," she said, "You ain't old enough to have sinned enough to have repented enough to be able to preach about it."

I haven't repented enough either. But on the other grounds I qualify.

As light summer fare I am going to preach three sermons on snares of the devil. My themes will be Contentment, Disillusionment and Self-fulfillment. That may surprise you since on the whole these sound like rather good things. But it is precisely the good-sounding things that the devil uses to catch us.

So it is with contentment. One of the finest testimonies to the power of Christian character in the Bible is found in Paul's assurance to the Philippians during his imprisonment.

"Not that I complain of want; for I have learned, in whatever state I am, to be content. I know how to be abased, and I know how to abound; in any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of facing plenty and hunger, abundance and want. I can do all things in him who strengthens me." Philippians 4:11-13.

Such a testimony puts to shame the petty discomfort that we so often express in situations of mild discontent. A few weeks ago I attended a lecture program at St. Deiniol's Library, an Anglican center in Wales that was established by Prime Minister Gladstone. There was considerable grumbling about the meals, which were very short on protein. I grumbled about them myself, but was embarrassed by the behavior of some of the other Americans in attendance. One morning I sat for breakfast next to the Subwarden, an Anglican minister who serves as assistant director of this institution. He was not responsible for the meals. However, as we sat there a man from Texas suddenly appeared. He and his wife had arrived late for breakfast and were very wroth because the sticky oatmeal we received every morning had run out. He shouted at the Subwarden:

"When my wife and I came in there wasn't any porridge. If we have to eat this crap, at least there ought to be enough."

The man from Texas and his wife were a charming couple. But in that instant I knew the meaning of the phrase, "The ugly American."

In one of his sermons at Riverside Church, Dr. Robert J. McCracken said:

Just how attractive a virtue contentment is we see as soon as we take into account the person who lacks it, the person who would rather air a grievance than acknowledge a kindness, who is consumed by petty and personal discontents. All of us are familiar with the inveterate grumbler complaining of the weather, the food, of the conditions under which he has to work, complaining of what goes on in his church, or in his club, or in Washington.

Yet that statement is from a sermon called The Duty of Being Discontented. If contentment may express Christian character so at times may its opposite. In the Bible we meet people moved by a holy discontent, people such as Moses and Jeremiah who will not accept the conditions they see around them. Some, like Habakkuk, even include God in the range of this holy discontent.

O Lord, how long shall I cry for help,
and thou wilt not hear?
Or cry to thee, "violence"
and thou shalt not save?
Why dost thou make me see wrongs
and look upon trouble?

.....
For the wicked surround the righteous,
so justice goes forth perverted.

Most remarkable of all God, too, shares in these "how longs." "How long will this people provoke me?" he asks again and again. And unless we think this agonizing discontent on the part of both God and humanity is only an Old Testament theme, we should recall Jesus' own cry of frustration.

"O wicked and perverse generation! How long must I bear with you!"

Such holy discontent suggests that unadulterated contentment is not always appropriate. It becomes a temptation to evil, a snare of the devil. Let me suggest three ways in which this danger occurs.

The first snare of contentment is vanity. It entraps us in attitudes of self-satisfaction and smugness. Little Jack Horner is the exemplar.

Little Jack Horner sat in the corner
Eating a Christmas pie.
He put in his thumb and pulled out a plum
And said, "What a good boy am I!"

The second snare is atrophy. When we become too contented we stop growing and we stop daring. Our spiritual energy runs dry and our talents shrivel up from disuse.

Most of us look forward to the bliss of contentment in old age. We feel that discontent may be valuable when people are young. Then it is a goad to drive them forward. When people are old they should have a chance to bask in their serenity. It is older people, however, who are most in danger of letting their contentment tempt them into atrophy. Hopefully we may also enjoy some serenity, but without the chance for new experiences and stimulating activities, we slip down into a hard rut of going on always in the same old way.

Maggie Kuhn, the Gray Panther leader, who appeared in Duluth earlier this year, is a good example of an older person whose discontent keeps her spiritually alive.

The third snare - just so we may have some tricky alliteration - is apathy. We cited Jack Horner. The Jolly Miller comes in handy here.

"I care for nobody - no not I...."

Even if we have reason to feel a jolly contentment about our own situation, we ought to share the legitimate discontent of others.

A sin of false contentment is not just an individual sin; it is social. It is a sin to which a society such as ours is especially prone. In contrast to the experience of many countries, the poor and oppressed among us do not make up the vast majority. They are not so conspicuous in their misery. Thus we easily settle into a spirit of national self-satisfaction, overlooking the fact that significant minorities among us do suffer not only materially but also at times in their rights and liberties.

An old article in my files reports that in 1965 there were 40,000 people in New York City who were living in dwellings that had been condemned as unfit for human habitation in 1900. I wonder how many are living in those same buildings now. Can such conditions persist except where massive public apathy allows?

How much evil might be eliminated, how much good accomplished, if both as individuals and as society, we did a better job of evading the snare of apathy that so often follows our feelings of contentment.

There is a kind of contentment we ought always to possess. It is reflected in that passage I quoted from the letter to the Philippians. This special, deep kind of contentment has a three-fold root. One root is appreciation, an active and joyous sense of all that is good and beautiful in the world. The second root is self-respect, not smugness, but a healthy regard for one's own worth as a person and as a child of God. The third root is faith, more particularly the faith that our destiny, come what may, is in God's hands. These are the roots of that underlying Christian contentment that we always need and which we seek to possess through all the discontents of our lives. What we need to look out for is that shallow variety of contentment which leads to those snares of the devil - vanity, atrophy and apathy.