

First Presbyterian Church, Bridgeton, NJ  
Richard E. Sindall, Pastor  
Sermon for September 18, 2011  
Lessons: Exodus 16:2-4,13-18 and Matthew 20:1-16

## A SPIRIT OF SATISFACTION

When I was a boy, my sister would play a song called, “Satisfied Mind.” I did not share her taste in music, but for all these years I have remembered some of the words:

Money can't buy back  
Your youth when you're old  
Or a friend when you're lonely  
Or a love that's grown cold

The wealthiest person  
Is a pauper at times  
Compared to the man  
With a satisfied mind<sup>1</sup>

What do you think of the idea of having a satisfied mind? How do you feel about it? I have thought a satisfied mind would be a terrible thing to have, but over the years, I’ve realized that satisfaction has more than one kind of opposite in life. Is the opposite of satisfied curious, inquisitive, interested, or even open-minded? Or is its opposite anxious, disappointed, jealous, and maybe even compulsive or obsessive? Is it healthful or stifling to have a satisfied mind? The biblical theologian Walter Brueggemann makes a remarkable contrast which bears upon both of our scripture lessons and the times in which we live. Of biblical faith’s conflict with the world’s wisdom and practice, he writes:

At the root of reality [for the Bible] is a *limitless generosity* that extends an extravagant abundance. . . . This insistence flies in the face of the theory of scarcity on which the modern world is built. An *ideology of scarcity* produces a competitiveness that issues in brutality, justifies policies of wars and aggression, authorizes an acute individualism, and provides endless anxiety about money, sexuality, physical fitness, beauty, work achievements, and finally mortality. It seems to me that in the end all of these anxieties are rooted in an ideology that resists a notion of limitless generosity and extravagant abundance.<sup>2</sup>

Jesus says, “I have come so that they [the people who have been victimized, used, and robbed] may have life and have it abundantly.” God’s creation is designed to offer abundance, but God did not create us to live with a spirit of greed, self-indulgence, and jealousy over others who seem to have more than we do. So, once liberated from slavery in Egypt, the Israelites had to spend years in the desert where scarcity was the very definition of their environment so they could learn to trust their God’s extravagant generosity and share life as God’s people without falling prey to the temptations of abundance once God had brought them into a more fertile land.

Do we hear how remarkable Brueggemann’s contrast is and how foolish it must sound to people trained to live by taking as much as they can before time, misfortune, or other people take it away? Even our beliefs about *virtue* are based on competition to be more virtuous than certain other people we could name or identify as types we believe lack virtue. I think Brueggemann is right that our modern world is built upon belief in scarcity – that there isn’t enough for everyone, enough to go around; that there is never enough for all to be satisfied. With our belief in life’s scarcity comes fear. What if something takes away what I have for my present and future needs? We live in our fear of “what if?” and that fear pits us against each other, turning life into a competition for scarce goods.

Jesus’ parable summons us to a different outlook on life, but this particular parable is difficult in our modern and postmodern times. Jesus employs a favorite teaching method of his which today we call “the argument from lesser to greater.” The assumption is that we will understand the lesser situation (the everyday) and agree readily with what Jesus is saying about it. For example, yes, a worthy shepherd will go out in search of just one sheep that has wandered off. Yes, a pearl merchant might sell all his stock to buy one truly exquisite pearl. Yes, a man with any sense will count the cost before beginning to build a tower on his property, lest it stand unfinished as a monument to his poor planning and a joke to his neighbors. But when it comes to this parable about the fieldhands hired at different times of day, we do not accept the logic of the lesser part of the argument. Does the farmer have the right to be generous with the workers who put in only a few hours without also adding to the pay of those who labored the whole time? We tend to answer, “No,” don’t we? So, the parable is lost on us if we let ourselves debate the labor issue, and we have a very difficult time getting to the greater issue, which is the extravagant generosity of God’s redemptive love.

Here’s the situation back then. Men who were day laborers went early each morning to the market in hope of being hired for one day’s work for which they would be paid one denarius, which was just enough to provide bread for their families for the following day. Jesus’ prayer, “Give us this day our daily bread,” is sometimes translated as, “Give us this day our bread for tomorrow.” It is the prayer of the day laborer. *Give me work today so my*

*family will eat tomorrow.* But sometimes a man just cannot make it to the market as early as he would like. Something happens at home or along the way. One of his children gets sick or hurt, or he has to comfort his wife who can't stop crying because the children are so hungry or just because life is so hard and hopeless and her one garment is wearing out but they can't afford cloth. So others get hired in the competition for daily bread, and the dismissive who have meat on their tables say, "Well, you know, it's the early bird that gets the worm." Sometimes people just get tired of fighting with life and with each other for nothing much better than worms.

This extravagant farmer needs more fieldhands for the abundance of his harvest, and so he keeps returning to the market to hire the latecomers. All he promises them is a fair wage, and because taking home something to their wives and children will be better than nothing, they go into his fields and work. At the close of the day, he pays each worker enough by the daily bread standard, difficult as such a standard may be for us even to imagine. What we regard as minimal wealth amounts to more comfort, luxury, convenience, opportunity, leisure, finery, and security than kings and queens had before modern times. Yet, our anxieties have not decreased, and the pressures we apply to ourselves and each other continue to mount in the heightened competitiveness of a recession.

Our reading from Exodus is also a parable in its own way. No matter how much food the people gathered each day from what God provided in the wilderness, they never had more or less than enough. Yes, for those who fear that the masses might fall into the "moral hazard" of laziness, they did still have to go out and gather while surviving in the desert. There's no moral hazard involved but only a lesson in satisfaction with being the beloved people of a generous God. It's the same as Jesus' parable of the day laborers. Of course, as you know, Christianity has long since narrowed the meaning and message of the parable to the question of getting into heaven after death, and so people who repent and confess their faith at the very end of their lives are called "eleventh hour workers." We need to widen and deepen the meaning again to its proper biblical size. I have said repeatedly from this pulpit that Jesus came to get heaven into us, not just us into heaven. As good parents care more about the kind of people their children become than the amount of success they achieve, God cares what kind of people we are becoming in relation to each other.

The parable is not about eleventh-hour conversions. It's about our getting in tune with God's spirit of extravagant generosity so that, trusting God, we live with a belief in abundant life strong enough to give us a spirit of satisfaction that issues in a habit of generosity. Jesus is telling his proudly virtuous critics, who object when he reaches out to the poor and the despised, that God is extravagantly generous. God is not concerned with the standards of reward and punishment. God's standard is the extravagant generosity of redemptive love. Jesus is calling us to live by God's standard.

So, how do I feel now about a satisfied mind? If satisfied means I can close my mind to curiosity, interest, passion for life, desire for social and economic justice for all people, unrest at the cruelties and injustices done to unpopular groups or to people easily used, then I must say, “No, thank you,” to the offer of a satisfied mind. Who can be content when so many people are hurting so much, when even people who have had the benefits of secure childhood and higher education are having the doors of opportunity slammed in their faces? Imagine what is happening to the truly poor and already marginalized! But where faith lifts a spirit of satisfaction above greed and above the anxieties about our lives and our futures with which fear of scarcity plagues us, then a satisfied mind starts to sound good. Trust in God does not excuse us from sharing the pain in life but increases our troubled awareness of suffering and distress by binding us to the rejected, abused, and forgotten in our world. But faith and hope do replace scarcity and competition as life’s greatest realities by revealing to us the astounding reality of God’s extravagant generosity and unrelenting love. In that spirit of satisfaction Jesus calls us to live. Amen.

Notes:

1. “Satisfied Mind,” songwriters Jack Rhodes and Red Hayes. I checked my memory of the lyrics on the Web site: [http://www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/j/jeff\\_buckley/satisfied\\_mind.html](http://www.lyricsmode.com/lyrics/j/jeff_buckley/satisfied_mind.html)
2. Walter Brueggemann, *Theology of the Old Testament*, p. 559.