

First Presbyterian Church
Psalm 16, “The Contours of A Contented Heart”
by Pastor Matt Johnson, 8/29/2021

There is great value in looking at something that has been done well:
Why was it done well? What makes it last?
What gives it value, goodness, or beauty?
What preparation and practice are required?

When I was in Canada a couple weeks ago visiting Sonja’s
parents and sisters, we spent a lot of time making food,
eating food, and talking about making and eating food
– especially oatmeal raisin cookies
and Swedish cardamum buns called bullar.

Now, as you may know, when a parent and child
both make the same baked goods, there can be some discussion
of just what techniques make them a little different ...
and maybe just under the surface a little competition
about which way of baking them is best.

(Personally, I don’t get involved in such discussions,
I just enjoy the results.)

The point here is that this kind of observation
of another person’s way of baking
is a way of learning and passing on knowledge.

For myself, I practice watercolor painting,
and so I’ve started to notice how different artists
approach their craft through YouTube videos.

Like with cooking or anything we learn in life,
there are many different successful approaches to painting.
Some of them I will never try to emulate,
but I can always learn something from
seeing how an artist chooses to approach
their painting.

By looking at an example of the best,
we can learn about why something is good,
and we can more easily detect when something is wrong
in our own lives before we overbake our cookies
or ruin our painting, or whatever it is we do.

In Psalm 16, King David presents the contours of a contented heart
...and we see a spiritual life before God that is beautiful.
While we live in a time of great discontent
we can learn a lot from looking
at the habits of the heart that David shares
with us here.

The Psalm begins, “Keep me safe, my God, for in you I take refuge.”

David begins with a plea that God keep him safe,
and a declaration that he is looking for safety in God.
This is the foundation of David’s heart before God.

The first line is not really so remarkable –
everyone in the world wants God to keep them safe!
What is profound is the second line –
“for in you I take refuge.”

Asking God to save is different from finding refuge in God.
One is an instinctual cry, the other involves rejecting
other sources of refuge and actually pursuing
the safety in God’s presence.

This is a contented heart’s origin—finding refuge in God
rather than some other place, some other activity,
or some other person.

What do you take refuge in?
What are the places, people, habits, elements, rhythms
that provide you safety in the midst of a storm?
When we take refuge in God, it doesn’t mean we disregard
our embodied existence when things get tough.
We will always be embodied creatures who want warmth
and touch and perfectly baked Swedish cardamum buns.

But taking refuge in God does mean we let go of the mythology
that we can still get through life exactly as we planned it.
We can't take refuge in God if we are also
attempting to control over our circumstances at all costs.

This is the foundation of David's contended heart.
Next, in verses 2-4, David moves through 3 statements:

He declares who his God is, he declares where his community is,
he declares who his God is not.

**² I say to the LORD, "You are my Lord;
apart from you I have no good thing."**

David declares who his God is by using God's personal name, "YHWH."
This is a declaration of familiarity, of intimacy,
"I say to YHWH, 'You are my Adonai (my Lord).'"

So YHWH, "I am who I am" is David's master, his king, his lord.
And apart from this personal connection, David has no good thing.

We know what we are worshipping by identifying
what we expect good things from.
If you only expect good things to come from
proper management of money,
guess what you're worshipping?

If you look to a particular relationship—with a spouse or a friend
or whoever—as the be-all and end-all of your happiness,
guess what you're worshipping?

David doesn't do this—he knows that the money he has
and the relationships he has are not producers of good in themselves,
but they are good things received
directly and exclusively from YHWH.

And in adopting this posture, he is declaring who his true God is.

The second thing David declares is who his community is. Verse 3 reads,

**³ I say of the holy people who are in the land,
“They are the noble ones in whom is all my delight.”**

God’s people are his people, the ones set apart for the work of God.

We have to know who our inner community is.

This is not to say that we only associate with Christians
(by no means!).

But the people of God are the ones who depend upon us,

the community that remind us who we are,
the compass to help us get our bearings in the storm.

What we are learning over the past year or more

is how to be present with one another even when
we must be physically apart.

We still have much to learn, but we should take delight

from being in the presence of those whom God has set apart.

Set apart for what?

Set apart to announce the good news of God in the world.

To be peacemakers. To be a light to the nations.

To be lovers of the unloved people in the world.

Set apart to be honest about our own shortcomings and frailty

and how God loves us just as we are so that
our life together announces to the world what God is like.

That’s what Christian community is about.

The last thing David does in this section is he declare who his God is not.

Worshipping false gods leads to suffering,

so David won’t participate in their dinners,

and he won’t call out the names of these false gods
when he’s in trouble.

You might ask—why is this necessary if David’s already been

so clear about who his God is?

Because people are stupid, that’s why. We are easily confused.

And that’s always been true, but even mores now that
the false gods we are called to worship

don’t have statues and funny names—

instead we carry them around

in our pockets!

If we see the contours of David's heart here and imitate it,
then Yahweh is truly our God, we truly take refuge in God,
the people of God are also our people,
we delight in fellowship with each other,
...and this is not my god!

It's David's practice in prayer to make these things explicit
rather than trust that it's in there somewhere.
We can learn from this and do the same:
Take time to name the false gods who you will not turn to.

As a result of all this, David's heart is content
and he lives with great security.

Then in verses 7-10 David puts together a series of statement
that include various aspects of his person:
his heart, his eyes, his right hand, his heart (a second time),
his tongue, and his body. READ IT.

⁷ I will praise the LORD, who counsels me;
even at night my heart instructs me.

⁸ I keep my eyes always on the LORD.
With him at my right hand, I will not be shaken.

⁹ Therefore my heart is glad and my tongue rejoices;
my body also will rest secure,

¹⁰ because you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead,
nor will you let your faithful^[b] one see decay.

Taken together it's a picture of total life connection to God.

In the Bible the heart is more than just a place for emotions.
It is the seat of the will, the command center of a person.
Because David has taken counsel from God,
David's own heart instructs him—even if he's dreaming.

David connected to God through his goals
("my eyes are on YHWH"),
and through constant reliance on God
("with him at my right hand").

And that, once again, results in contentedness and security.
Body and soul, David belongs to God.

His heart has been shaped by God's own heart,
and he knows that God will not abandon him even in death.
This line, "you will not abandon me to the realm of the dead,"
is picked up on by the early church,
and the book of Acts records it as being fulfilled
ultimately in the resurrection of Jesus.

This doesn't mean that God will spare you from death:
both David and Jesus died. For sure.

Rather, God will not *abandon* us to death.

There is company even in death when our hearts are joined with God's.
So he closes with these lines...

¹¹ You make known to me the path of life;
you will fill me with joy in your presence,
with eternal pleasures at your right hand.

We've seen a thing done well here.
We've seen the contours of a contented heart before the Living God.

If we pray the Psalms while watching closely the movements of David,
if we see how he has framed himself before God and the world,
we can begin to move through life like he did.