



## Christ Lutheran Church

605 South Fifth Street • Norfolk, NE 68701

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Pastor Chip Winter, Director of Ministries

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### ***“Contentment.” – Philippians 4:6-20***

*Day of National Thanksgiving – November 22, 2017*

**Pastor Chip Winter**

Grace to you and Peace, from God our Father and from our Lord and Savior, Jesus Christ, Amen. The text for our sermon is the epistle appointed for the Day of National Thanksgiving and already read for us from St. Paul's letter to the Philippians.

My dear family in Christ, Amyotrophic lateral sclerosis. It's a seldom uttered mouthful, but most of us know what it is. It goes by the letters ALS and is also known as Lou Gherig's disease. It's a brutal sentence wherein the brain loses control of the bodies muscles. What a cruel irony that a disease known for crippling quickly and completely should strike someone as relentless as Lou Gehrig.

Playing for the New York Yankees from 1923 until 1939, Gehrig was known as the “Iron Horse.” His record of playing 2,130 consecutive games was thought unbreakable for nearly 60 years, until Cal Ripken, Jr. did it in 1995. Gehrig was the first athlete to have his number retired. He was a player beloved by player and fan alike for his drive to play day in and day out.

His farewell speech was delivered to a packed crowd at Yankee Stadium. It was given because the Iron Horse was retiring prematurely, a consequence of the ALS. Lou said, **“Fans, for the past two weeks you have been reading about the bad break I got. Yet today I consider myself the luckiest man on the face of the earth.”**

Those words are almost unthinkable in an age when so many expect life to be delivered to them, pristine and unblemished, on a silver platter. Multimillionaire athletes refuse to honor their own name – with which they signed a contract – choosing to hold out rather than play for less than what they think they ought to be paid.

But it's not just athletes. It's you, me, all of us. Hasn't the sentiment passed over your mind or through your lips, "**I deserve better than this**"? What a contrast to the words of Lou Gehrig in which we hear a man who is content in spite of the difficult lot he'd been given.

How can one be content when the world seems to be crumbling around them? One option would be the stoic route. Don't let anything get to you. Shut yourself off from the things outside yourself. But taking that route, not letting troubles to get you down, will also keep you from letting joy bring you elation. Shutting yourself off from outside things – maintaining that even keel - means constructing a cold, empty life. In an attempt to protect yourself from pain you rob yourself of life's beauty and grace.

Perhaps you've tried this before with respect to that person who always gets on your nerves. Vowing not to react to their callous remarks you end up being cold not only to them but to others. You end up not being able to take a well-intended piece of advice from anyone, or unable to rejoice with another's accomplishments. That's not a way of finding contentment in dark times – unless you're willing to posit that God has created a bleak, ugly and pointless world.

Or, perhaps you could content yourself by finding someone worse off, someone of whom you could say "At least I'm not in their shoes." A fellow pastor did that in college, during intramural basketball games. He enjoyed the camaraderie, but he was not a gifted athlete – he'd fumble passes and throw up bricks. One Friday, walking back to his dorm room and berating himself for his poor play, he saw a girl named Amy who lived across the hall. Amy was born without legs. She walked

to and from class on her hands, using flip-flops to protect her palms. On other days she did have a motorized scooter she would use around campus. Seeing Amy stopped his pity party as he thought “I need to stop complaining because at least I have legs so I can play basketball.”

While there is some wisdom in that insight, that’s not how to find contentment. A search for someone who’s to be pitied more than you will leave you disheartened because your focus will be on life’s tragedies, rather than its beauties and its gifts. You may also rob yourself of enjoying the company of some most remarkable people because you’ll reduce them to objects of pity rather than people created by God and loved by Him, meant to be on the receiving end of the Almighty’s grace and beauty.

Paul describes the true means of finding contentment. The conditions under which Paul writes bring a fullness to his teaching. He is writing from prison, which ought not to be all that surprising because for the sake of the Gospel Paul would spend roughly one quarter of his ministry in prison.

None of us would want to be imprisoned, but what we would endure today looks like the Ritz-Carlton compared to what Paul endured. In a volume of Christian History, John McRay described it with these words: **“Roman imprisonment was preceded by being stripped naked and then flogged – a humiliating, painful and bloody ordeal. The bleeding wounds went untreated as prisoners sat in painful leg or wrist chains. Mutilated, bloodstained clothing was not replaced, even in the cold of winter. Most cells were dark, especially in the inner cells of a prison, like the one Paul and Silas inhabited in Philippi. Unbearable cold, lack of water, cramped quarters, and sickening stench from few toilets made sleeping difficult and waking hours miserable...Because of the miserable conditions, many prisoners begged for a speedy death. Others simply committed suicide.”**

St. Paul is in such a place, and undeservedly so. Imprisoned for proclaiming the love of God in Christ Jesus Paul writes, **“I have learned in whatever situation I am to be content.”** Plenty and hunger? Abundance and need? It does not matter.

But that’s where his situation differs from ours. I expect that somewhere tomorrow morning my mouth will salivate from the scent of what’s cooking. Before the day is done I’ll have enjoyed a feast with my family. I may well take some pictures and post or tweet *#LifeIsGood*. Paul has none of that. Yet if he did have social media, he would have posted a picture of himself in the squalor of a Roman prison and captioned it *#Content*.

The secret of St. Paul’s contentment is Christ Jesus. Eyes focused on yourself won’t do it. Eyes focused on others won’t do it – because comparison truly is the death of contentment. Not even eyes focused on a feast or a family will bring contentment. It is having them focused on Jesus.

Paul doesn’t have delusions of grandeur – that Jesus will make all his troubles disappear, that his dank, cold dungeon will suddenly become an oasis. Paul anticipates ongoing suffering at the hands of the enemies of Christ.

Yet none of that can rob him of Jesus. Neither suffering nor death can rob him of the One Who went to the cross on his behalf – who took Paul’s punishment as His own – Who rose again from the dead to bring life and immortality to light through the Gospel.

St. Paul is content in all circumstances because his contentment is not grounded in the circumstances but in the Lord Who has brought us forgiveness and life. Some of you won’t be having the feast you desire. Some of you won’t be blessed by the fellowship of family that you’ve known in the past. Yet contentment remains yours in Christ Jesus.

That doesn’t mean it will be easy – on this day or any other holiday. You will bear the cross as a child of God, but you don’t bear it alone. Jesus is with you to shoulder the burden. Truly, he has

already carried your burden to the cross on Calvary. He has won your forgiveness, your eternal reconciliation with God. He is here to strengthen you so that you and I can say with Paul, **“I can do all things through Him who strengthens me.”**

If you are not feasting tomorrow, Christ promises a day is coming soon with an eternal feast for you. If you are feasting, Christ promises the coming feast, a foretaste of which we share tonight, will dwarf what you have tomorrow.

If death has separated you from one you love, you are not alone for Christ lives with you. If there is a division in your family, Christ assures you that he has brought you peace with our heavenly Father.

The day is coming when there will be that perfect reunion, that everlasting feast. Until then, Paul assures us **“My God will supply every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”** (19) That is the secret to St. Paul’s contentment, as well as ours. Amen.