



Mary and Bob often find themselves sharing common ground when it comes to philosophy and ministry. When approaching ministerial concerns from different angles, He Said - She Said is a venue to share differing perspectives.

## Content or Discontent

*Bob's Perspective:*

### **Content or Discontent: That is the Question! (with apologies to William Shakespeare)**

*"Content, or discontent: that is the question:  
Whether 'tis nobler in the mind to suffer  
The slings and arrows of a life seemingly unfulfilled,  
Or to take arms against a sea of troubles,  
And there to live in happiness and inner peace."*

In about two months, I'll be celebrating my second year of full-time retirement. I'll soon be celebrating my 68<sup>th</sup> birthday. So now I look back and ask myself, "Am I content with my life?" I'm not alone in this boat. When most people pass a mile-marker of life, be it a birthday, the anniversary of a significant event, or some sort of special achievement, it's not uncommon to then reflect on the current status of contentment (or lack thereof) in their life.

The tough part of this analysis comes with how one defines contentment – and to what degree it's experienced. Some may define contentment as happiness, some as satisfaction, some as resignation to the "way life is," and some to a combination of all the aforementioned criteria. Life's not perfect; it certainly has its ups and downs. But even within the highest and lowest points, I would suggest that contentment (or lack thereof) needs to be measured on a sliding scale. If not, we are in danger of slipping into complacency – which, despite Webster's definition, can happen on either side of the fence.

To that end, here are some questions upon which to reflect:

1. What is my definition of happiness?
2. Am I a generally happy person? (If not, what can I do about it?)
3. Do I find life to be enjoyable on a consistent basis?
4. Do I intentionally do things in my life that at least have the potential of making me happy?
5. Do I try to see life from a positive standpoint?
6. How do I define satisfaction?
7. Do I equate satisfaction with accomplishment, failure, or a good try?



8. At what degree of satisfaction would I rate myself?
9. In what way(s) do I feel unsatisfied?
10. Do I just give in to "the way it is," or do I look at all the possibilities?

So, what about the sliding scale? As I mentioned before, life's not perfect. In almost everything we do, there are degrees of success. How we measure those degrees (see question 7) gives us the end result of whether or not we're content. If we're too content, we become complacent and stunt our continued growth. If we're too discontented, we become complacent and stunt our growth. (Is there an echo in here?)

Think about it!

*Mary's Perspective:*

The thought-starter for this blog actually came from a preacher whose message really resonated in me. He observed that the two primary thieves of contentment are **unrealistic expectations** and **unfair comparisons**. We have written before that, in the scheme of things, God doesn't compare us to others, nor does he expect us to measure up to anyone else. The only measure of our success and growth (or lack thereof) is to look at earlier versions of ourselves and see if our journey has been in a positive direction.

Consider a professional athlete. Having excelled at sports through his or her formative years, the elite athlete may have sights set on a career in the NFL or NBA. When the time comes, perhaps that same athlete is drafted in the second round. The professional contract may be in the millions, clearly setting that person's financial future for life. Does that athlete rejoice in the windfall? Or does that athlete feel disgruntled at not being selected in the first round? Before they have even set foot on the professional court or field, that person has expectations of self, of team, and of employer. In some way, it is those expectations that have fueled the growth of the athlete to rise to the elite level. However, do those expectations become the source of discontent? Does that athlete look at others from the same draft, and compare offers? Are differences in salary or bonus potential another source of discontent?

Why does it seem that we are hard-wired to want more?

Partly, I propose that rumblings of discontent can serve a positive purpose, in that they fuel growth. We strive harder, reach a little higher, when we recognize that we can do better. Feeling unsettled or unhappy can energize ambitious behaviors. The desire to improve a



situation can result in positive reinforcement – when we consciously look to improve our lot in life, the effort is rewarded. If you work out at the gym, lifting weights on a regular basis, you are likely motivated to add a few pounds to the bar or machine when you realize you’ve been stuck at this level for a while. If you are diligently seeking to lose weight, maintaining a food journal keeps you honest and motivates better choices. If you are working on a project at work or school, knowing that completing the project will not only ease your current discontent (free up some spare time) but also provide a positive outcome (good grade or perhaps bonus check) encourages your efforts to finish the project.

The challenge comes when we are perpetually discontent. How many folks do you know that are regularly grumpy? Curmudgeons? Ones that answer the question, “how are you?” with a big sigh? Do you have friends that have forgotten what it’s like to feel happy? For whom “bleak” is their comfort zone? Particularly this time of year, when the days are shorter and the cool winds blow, it is easy to get swirled into a vortex of negativity. (That’s part of why we started our Two for Tuesday inspirations!)

I look back at the questions Bob provided, and I think they are worth spending some time contemplating. (Yes, I actually agree with Bob this time! As he says, every now and then...) If your life isn’t enjoyable on a consistent basis, why not? Pardon the redundancy, but are you content to be discontent? And if so, why?

As the liturgical year draws toward the end of Ordinary Time, the Church has been proclaiming a lot of the writings of Saint Paul. It seems to me that Paul was kind of an odd bird. He knew what it was like to be broke and he had times when he was rich. He experienced both freedom and imprisonment. Even though it wasn’t the popular path, he chose to be Christian. Regardless of circumstances, he learned to be content because he focused on striving to please Christ rather than impress others.

It's easy to be frustrated with your lot in life, and to feel stuck with unchangeable circumstances. The gauntlet we throw today is to consider, deep down, your own sources of happiness and rumblings of discontent. To which will you give priority? Are you comparing yourself to someone else, whether looking at money or prestige or social media persona? Is it easier to grump about what a miserable hand life has dealt you, or better to actually do something about it?



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There are a lot of things over which I feel I have no control. I vote, yet I don't think it really makes a difference. I try to eat well and exercise, yet I don't feel like I can substantially change my size. I work hard, but won't ever reach the financial level of an elite athlete (or even a mediocre athlete, to be honest!). I can't reverse a medical diagnosis a friend has received, nor can I stop the hands of time from creeping forward.

What I can control is how I react to each circumstance. I can choose to focus on the sources of my contentment. I can nurture the positive, in myself and in others. I can observe the everyday miracles happening all around me that perhaps I've been too grumpy to notice. I can savor a warm cup of coffee on a cool autumn day, revel in the glorious colors of the leaves around me, and thank God for each breath I took this morning.

If I'm feeling discontented with life, I can either find ways to change the circumstances or reconsider how I define satisfaction. I can quit comparing myself to others, and discern the view from God's eyes. Are my expectations unrealistic? Do I think the rules should bend just a little for me because I'm special? If I deflate my ego, adjust my expectations, and strive to please Christ instead of some worldly sense of success, I might find I'm a whole lot happier.

Are you feeling discontent? Why?

And what are you going to do about it?

PS – Happy Birthday, Bob! You continue to age with grace and wisdom... like fine wine... or moldy cheese...