

## SATISFACTION

Psalm 63: 1-8; Isaiah 55: 1-9

Are you satisfied? Are you satisfied with your life, your work, your relationships, what you have, what you have accomplished, the way life has turned out for you? Are you satisfied with the way people have treated you? Have you lived something of your dreams? Or have you had to learn how to accept what is even if it's not what you hoped or dreamed?

Are you restless and bored with life, searching for something more or different? Or have you settled for what is and try to convince yourself it's good enough?

Are you aggrieved by how life has turned out or how the unfairness of life has affected you? Or have you come to terms with the fact that injustice is a permanent feature of our world in some way and you are not especially protected from it?

Well most of us are somewhere in between much of the time, no? Without some satisfaction and contentment, life would be unlivable. Without some dissatisfaction and even a frustration and restlessness in search of something more, something different, something better, we would accomplish very little. How do we find the balance between accepting what is and agitating for what can be? How do we find the balance between gratitude for all the blessings and a restlessness for change because we are dissatisfied with the way things are?

These questions are as old as civilization itself. One of the greatest theologians of the ancient world: Augustine, wrote his famous book entitled: *Confessions*, as a personal memoir mapping his whole life as one long search for something more satisfying. Augustine had an inner restlessness that refused to allow him any satisfaction. Material prosperity, academic success, social recognition, sexual adventures, travel, exploration of various philosophies and lifestyles... nothing would bring him satisfaction for long. His whole memoir is one long meditation on this prayer: "Our hearts are restless until they find their rest in thee, O God." Augustine came to see his dissatisfaction and restlessness as a gift. It drove him, finally, into the arms of God. If he just settled for an inadequate life, he would have settled for any one of the many stops on his journey, never finding a higher satisfaction and fulfillment.

But Augustine's restlessness as a gift in search of a higher satisfaction was just one way of looking at life in the ancient world. There were also philosophers called Epicureans. Epicureans believed the secret to life's satisfaction was not feeding the restlessness, but learning the art of acceptance and simplicity. Where Augustine wanted more until he got to the fullness of bliss in communion with God, Epicureans believed such bliss an illusion. The deepest satisfaction was in learning to want less and to embrace less. Simplicity was the goal. Until we humans learn how less is more and life's fullness is in being content with little, we will never achieve satisfaction.

So who's right? Is it Augustine or the Epicureans? Is the answer to fuel our inner restlessness so that we keep searching for something truly worthy of fulfilling our satisfaction in life? Or is the answer more in learning to curb this inner desire for more and better until we learn the art of satisfaction and contentment with less?

Perhaps it depends on what we're talking about. There are at least two kinds of dissatisfaction. There is a dissatisfaction that is material and social, and there is a dissatisfaction that has to do with the injustices of life. Let's begin with material and social dissatisfaction.

1) In recent surveys of people with varying household incomes in North America, participants were asked whether they were satisfied with their annual incomes. The answers were surprising and not surprising. Whether someone made \$30,000/year or \$300,000/year, most people said that if they just made 20% more, they would be satisfied. And you know, our whole capitalist system feeds on such material dissatisfaction. Constantly wanting more and better and newer, being dissatisfied with what we have, how we look, how many friends we have, our position, our job, our marriage, how much we're appreciated... Dissatisfaction is what makes our world go round. If everyone was satisfied with what they had our economy would tank. If no one wanted more, our economy would shrink. But is our economy more important than our mental health and spiritual well-being?

So what's the remedy? Some Epicurean inner cleansing. Let's embrace simplicity. If I can't be satisfied with less I will never be satisfied with more. The carrot on the stick will keep moving forward just beyond our reach. Our purpose and fulfillment in life will always be about climbing upward or driving forward in search of a

mountain-top we'll never quite reach unless we embrace satisfaction in a whole other way. And our planet will thank us for it too. Unless we all embrace a big dose of simplicity and a less-is-more ethic, we're all doomed, and especially the generations to come.

2) But what about the injustices of life? Do we just accept them or do we protest and fight for something better and more satisfying? Here's a real-life story. Hashim Garret used to be very dissatisfied with his life. He grew up in a violent neighbourhood, eventually joining a gang as a young teen. He was angry because he was hurting and he wanted to hurt others. It wasn't so much money he wanted. He wanted respect and he wanted power and by making others fear him he could get both.

But here's where it all turned against Hashim. One day a few of his so-called friends asked him to come along to a party, and they told him not to bring his gun. Hashim assumed that they cared about him and didn't want him to get arrested in case the police showed up. What actually happened, however, was that they were setting him up. Once Hashim arrived, they shot him. He had killed others, now he was being killed. And yet, Hashim did not die. He survived. His so-called buddies wanted to teach him a lesson. He was too ambitious. He was too dissatisfied. He wanted too much. He had to learn a lesson.

So what lesson did Hashim learn? He says that even as he was falling down after being shot he felt the anger inside him leave him. On the ground he was just a vulnerable 15-year-old calling out for his mother. His mother did come, as did the ambulance and police too. After some surgery, getting stabilized and regaining consciousness, Hashim found out that he was permanently paralyzed and would never walk again. Friends came by to visit and promised him they would exact some revenge.

But Hashim's mother was also there by his side every day. She gave him a bible. How would Hashim find satisfaction in the face of the mess he had made of his life and the betrayal of his so-called friends? Would vengeance get him satisfaction for what was done to him? Would forgiveness for all he had done to others do it? Would greater justice for kids like Hashim growing up in poor neighbourhoods with few options and surrounded by the lure of power and money through gangs and drugs do it? How would Hashim find his satisfaction?

Before we get to the rest of Hashim's story, let's turn to our scripture readings for some revelatory guidance. Our readings are all about satisfaction as well. What do they have to say?

Both readings use the imagery of hunger and thirst. They also use the imagery of food and drink. But what is the food and drink for which we hunger and thirst? Is it material, is it the justice of revenge, or is it something else entirely? As human creatures we hunger and thirst for meaning and purpose, for love, for satisfaction. But how do we find it? Psalm 63 would have been a favourite of Augustine's, for it points to one source for true and ultimate satisfaction: God. But what does it mean for God to be our satisfaction? The psalmist doesn't tell us what it is, only how and where they found it: during worship. Whatever dissatisfaction they were carrying, somehow through the practice of worship they felt the "steadfast love" of the Lord flood their hearts. They also speak of God being their "help" and having felt safe and protected somehow under "the shadow of God's wings".

This sounds wonderful. I envy the psalmist. To feel love flood my heart and to feel protected is a beautiful thing to experience. But I, for one, would want more concrete details. How can God give me such love and such a feeling of safety? How can such experience shape my life purpose and the vulnerability I face every day in the world?

Well, maybe our reading from Isaiah can help. Isaiah, too, refers to hunger and thirst and to food and drink, except the accent in Isaiah is not in being satisfied by getting enough, but rather, finding the right kind of food and drink. Once again, Augustine would resonate deeply with this reading. "Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labour for that which does not satisfy?" asks the prophesy. You're going after all the wrong stuff. The richest food and the most expensive wine will not satisfy your hunger and thirst. All the money, power, friends and recognition will not do it for you. Why? Because it's all external. It's all dependent on what's out there coming in. The scriptures repeatedly challenge us to go inwards and then work our way outwards. Unless our hearts and our spirits touch that place of satisfaction inside, nothing gained on the outside will ever give it to us.

The psalmist would agree with Isaiah. It all has to be felt in the heart. But how does worship which does it for the psalmist, connect with the rest of my life out there in the world? How does the love of God in my heart connect with the call of love out there in a world where people are out for themselves and injustice reigns? How do I find satisfaction when I don't always experience love but hurt, harm and a lack of safety and protection?

Isaiah's prophesy tells the people that what they need most is the kind of love that is steadfast in the real world. "Other nations you do not know shall run to you because of the Lord your God... for God has glorified you.." Why has God glorified them? Because they have forsaken their wickedness and unrighteousness. They have turned to the Lord and have experienced abundant mercy and pardon.

You see love and justice go together. Love felt internally should lead to justice committed to, fought for and advocated for externally. How have we sought out God's mercy and pardon as citizens of this planet, this nation, our personal relationships and all those ways we have sought satisfaction at the expense of the life around us? Our compassion for others and our concern for the planet we live on and for generations yet unborn, our cry for justice for Ukraine, for all those vulnerable to abuse by tyrants and bullies, and our commitment to healing and reconciliation with all those unjustly treated and neglected by our system... All of this is connected with our ultimate satisfaction. Ethics and joy, justice and personal fulfillment must come together if we want to taste the highest satisfaction. Otherwise, we are settling for less.

OK preacher, some big fine statements. But what does such satisfaction look like in real life? How does it look like for someone who is both a perpetrator and a victim like Hashim? Well, with lots of physical and spiritual therapy, Hashim's life changed. Any lingering satisfaction he believed could come from revenge, any emptiness and regret he wanted to overcome, it all became transfigured by love. He immersed himself in the writings of Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King Jr. He prayed for forgiveness and sought out all those he had hurt in his young life. Even though he could never restore those he had harmed and even as there were those who would never forgive him, Hashim dedicated his life to helping other young people like himself choose another path from guns, drugs, gangs and violence. Even though Hashim is still paralyzed, he is married, with two children

and has developed an award-winning program called "Breaking the Cycle." This program stresses honest communication and forgiveness as a way of resolving conflicts.

Hashim, like the psalmist, like Isaiah and like Augustine, has found a satisfaction that is spiritual and from the inside outwards. It's all about justice in the world, about healing and reconciliation and it has nothing to do with material prosperity or social recognition in the world. It's about risking the vulnerability of love in reaching out to others rather than playing it safe and settling for less in relationships and in life. And it is about Epicurean simplicity of life too. When you've got genuine love in your life and a meaningful purpose in living and applying it in the world, you don't need much that is material to be content. You have found the kind of food and drink that is truly satisfying.

Have you tasted inward satisfaction in your life? Has God been anywhere a part of that? Have you found a greater fullness in simplicity? Has forgiveness love, justice love and compassion love brought true satisfaction into your life? Amen.