

“I have nothing to wear.” Have you ever said that to yourself? “I have nothing to wear.” Hey, here’s a fun related question... have you ever said that to yourself on a day when your closet shelves and dresser drawers are so full that you couldn’t possibly fit one more article of clothing in them? And yet we say: “I have nothing to wear.”

Or... “there’s nothing to eat.” Have you ever said that to yourself? “There’s nothing to eat.” Out of curiosity... have you ever said that to yourself on a day when the freezer is so packed that you don’t even know what’s lining the bottom, when the fridge is stocked to overflowing, or when the pantry cupboard is so full that something falls on your head every time you open it? And yet we say: “there’s nothing to eat.”

“I have nothing to wear,” we too often say, despite the overabundance of clothes. “There’s nothing to eat,” we so often bemoan, despite the overabundance of food. It can’t possibly be true, of course. We can’t have a full closet *and* nothing to wear. We can’t have a full fridge *and* nothing to eat. Together, those things can’t possibly both be true... but together, they are revealing. Together, they reveal something about our relationship with abundance, our relationship with things, our relationship with stuff.

Today, as we start our new sermon series, a two-week series on contentment, we’ll be talking about that relationship, that relationship with stuff. To do that, we’ll be looking at a scripture that, at first glance, is focused more on relationships with family than on relationships with stuff. Hear these words from the book of Genesis, from the story of a pair of brothers named Jacob and Esau:

[Genesis 33:1-11, NRSV]

¹ Now Jacob looked up and saw Esau coming, and four hundred men with him. So he divided the children among Leah and Rachel and the two maids. ² He put the maids with their children in front, then Leah with her children, and Rachel and Joseph

last of all. ³ He himself went on ahead of them, bowing himself to the ground seven times, until he came near his brother.

⁴ But Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. ⁵ When Esau looked up and saw the women and children, he said, “Who are these with you?” Jacob said, “The children whom God has graciously given your servant.” ⁶ Then the maids drew near, they and their children, and bowed down; ⁷ Leah likewise and her children drew near and bowed down; and finally Joseph and Rachel drew near, and they bowed down. ⁸ Esau said, “What do you mean by all this company that I met?” Jacob answered, “To find favor with my lord.” ⁹ But Esau said, “I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself.” ¹⁰ Jacob said, “No, please; if I find favor with you, then accept my present from my hand; for truly to see your face is like seeing the face of God—since you have received me with such favor. ¹¹ Please accept my gift that is brought to you, because God has dealt graciously with me, and because I have everything I want.” So he urged him, and he took it.

Here in this story, we get to eavesdrop on a tearful and heartwarming family reunion -- and frankly, that Hallmark-movie moment is not what we would have expected from this family, from these brothers. These brothers... they've got history. They were at odds from the time they were in utero... but things really came to a head when the younger son Jacob manipulated his brother and tricked his father into giving him the blessing of the first-born. Esau (the rightful recipient of that blessing) was so incensed, so violently enraged that Jacob had to flee the country for fear of his brother's wrath. (See? God's family makes yours look downright functional.)

Time passes and people change. Despite Jacob's manifold shortcomings, God is an active presence in Jacob's life. God blesses Jacob and his endeavors, increases his property, and even works some real transforming power in his life. Eventually, Jacob decides it's time to face the music, return home, and make amends with his wronged

elder brother. Frankly, he's not quite sure how he'll be received. Has Esau managed to forgive and forget? Does time really heal all wounds? Uncertain as to whether he can place his trust in those worn-out clichés, Jacob decides to pave the way with a gift: flocks and herds and even servants, a significant portion of Jacob's amassed wealth.

He sends this gift (or peace offering or bribe, depending on how you read the story) ahead of himself... but when he and his family finally arrive at the meeting place, he bows before his brother in a gesture of deep humility. And what does Esau -- the man who once vowed to kill his brother Jacob -- do in response? Scripture tells us:

Esau ran to meet him, and embraced him, and fell on his neck and kissed him, and they wept. ... Esau said, "What do you mean by all this company that I met?" Jacob answered, "To find favor with my lord." But Esau said, "I have enough, my brother; keep what you have for yourself." (Genesis 33:4, 8-9, NRSV)

In response to his brother's peace offering -- a peace offering that, perhaps, would have made up for the financial impact of the stolen blessing -- Esau offers some powerful words. *You keep it. I want you to have it. I have enough.*

I have enough.

I wonder: in the midst of our daily lives, how many of us share Esau's perspective, his sense of contentment? How many of us can echo his words? *I have enough.* Can you say that, those of you who (despite an overabundance of clothes in your closet) say, "I have nothing to wear"? Can you echo those words, those of you who (despite an overabundance of food in the fridge) say, "There's nothing to eat"? *I have enough.* How many of us can say that, and really mean it? If you can't... you're not alone.

What's more: that's probably not entirely your fault. In this culture, our culture, this culture of overabundance, we're conditioned to long for more. Ours is not a culture that nurtures our contentment. Ours is a culture that foments our dissatisfaction. We're conditioned to believe that *nothing* is ever "enough." Author and United Methodist pastor Adam Hamilton puts it this way:

I am bombarded with messages such as: If you had a little bit more, you'd be happier. If you had this thing that you currently do not have, you'd find more satisfaction in life. If you had a bigger house or a nicer car or more fashionable clothes, you'd be happy -- at least happier than you are right now. Each of us is bombarded with messages such as these daily. ¹

That's the reality of the culture in which we live, in which we are raised, in which we raise our children. That's the reality of the culture that forms our worldview and (in part) shapes our values. More is better. Enough is never enough. That's why Esau's words, in the face of an offer of abundant wealth, sound so strange. *I have enough*. Who says that?

I do wish we had Esau's full story. You can search through Genesis, but you won't find it. It's just not there. The author of Genesis follows Jacob's story. And to be fair, that makes sense. The story of Israel will continue with Jacob's line. He's the patriarch to watch. He's the focus of the narrative.

But I do wish we had Esau's story. What happened to him over the course of all those years? What happened to Esau to take him from the place of saying *I will kill my brother for cheating me out of what's rightfully mine* to the place of saying *Peace, brother... I have enough*? How does he get from conflicted Point A to contented Point

¹ Adam Hamilton, *Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity* (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 2009), 65.

B? How I wish we had that story! How I wish we could see that process. Perhaps we could imitate it for ourselves. But we don't have that story.

What we do have... well, what we do have is the indwelling presence of the Holy Spirit and the teachings of the Lord Jesus Christ... so maybe we can work with that. In Luke 12 -- in which we find our other scripture reading for today, the one we read earlier in worship -- we find a series of Jesus' teachings. Teachings like: don't be hypocrites. Teachings like: do not fear, know your value. Teachings like: don't get overly attached to your stuff. "Take care!" Jesus says. "Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (Luke 12:15, NRSV).

That's quite a bit different than what the wider culture teaches us. Indeed, as Pastor Adam writes: "The world continually tells me that my life *does* consist in the abundance of my possessions."² The prevailing culture encourages us to place our happiness and even our worth in material possessions. The wider world conditions us to want more. Neither encourages contentment. Yet despite what the prevailing culture or the wider world might say, Jesus does call us to contentment. Jesus insists that life does not consist in the abundance of stuff.

So let's do something really wild and "out there" and just assume Jesus knows what he's talking about. Let's assume Jesus is right. And then -- I don't know -- let's act as if we actually believe it, too (you know, like followers and disciples would do). Let's take some small steps to help us renegotiate how we think about stuff.

Jesus tells us: "one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (Luke 12:15, NRSV). There may be something, some possession, some bit of stuff you've

² Hamilton, *Enough*, 65.

been thinking about getting for yourself. Before you get it: wait. Wait a day. Wait three. You may find after that wait that it's still something you want or need... but then again, you may find that you can live into Jesus' words as you echo Esau's: *Never mind... I have enough.*

Jesus tells us: "one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (Luke 12:15, NRSV). Try this experiment: during a typical week (maybe even this week) keep track of what you spend on things, on possessions, on stuff. Every time you open your wallet. Every time you click the "place order" button. At the end of the week (just for fun), sort those purchases into categories: the "want" stuff and the "need" stuff, the "impulse buy" stuff and the "why did I buy that?" stuff. In the week that follows, you may find that simple sorting changes how you spend your money and how you view your stuff. You may find you can live into Jesus' words as you echo Esau's: *Don't I already have enough?*

Jesus tells us: "one's life does not consist in the abundance of possessions" (Luke 12:15, NRSV). Try this one: do a one-week spending fast. Spend nothing for seven days. Heat up the leftovers in the fridge and cook up the stuff you already have in the freezer and pantry. Rummage around in your closet, your basement, your junk drawer. Borrow instead of buy. Be resourceful. Let something wait. Try to spend nothing on stuff for one whole week. You may not make it. Things come up. Life happens. Sometimes you need to pick up some stuff. But you may find you can live into Jesus' words as you echo Esau's: *Wow... I really do have enough.*

You won't change everything by doing these things. But you will give the Spirit some elbow room to work. Maybe then the Spirit can help you change the way you

think about “stuff.” Maybe then the Spirit can help you embrace Jesus’ words and echo Esau’s. Maybe then the Spirit can cultivate some contentment in you.