Have you noticed how it seems to take more activities, more gadgets, more games, more entertainments, more restaurant choices, more items on menus, more options on cars, more colors for a simple phone than it used to take? Henry Ford, in the early years of the Model A, was fond of telling his customers they could have any color they wanted so long as it was black. At that time almost 100 years ago, choices were fewer and the canvas of life seemed more monochromatic.

Truth be told, we all have more choices for almost anything available to us than we need. At life’s most basic level, water, simple fruits and grains, and small amounts of meat and fish can sustain any human being indefinitely. Our roads would be less interesting, but all cars would function as they currently do even if all our vehicles were painted black. Would you consider for just the next few minutes that the plethora of choices for almost everything we use and consume today has overwhelmed us? And if it has, we may deeply long for a simple
prescription for contentment, embracing what we have and finding satisfaction.

Paul concludes his letter to the Philippians by confessing his own struggle with what has been a challenging, albeit rewarding life. He writes that he has personally known by experience what it means to have much and also to have little, the satisfaction of being well-fed and the desperation of being hungry. Out of those wide-ranging experiences, he came to one fundamental conclusion: “I can do all things through [Christ] who gives me strength.” Is such a place of contentment attainable? And if it were, is it sustainable? And if it is, how do we get there as followers of Jesus Christ?

This prescription for contentment begins with the pronoun “I”. Like it not, each of us becomes “square one”, “first base”, “the starting point” for learning what it means to live in the atmosphere of contentment. A long time ago… Pogo said…: “We have met the enemy and the enemy is us.” Tempting though it often is to blame others for
our woes while accepting all the praise for our successes, we of the human species only have to gaze in the mirror for a few minutes to remember that both our assets and our liabilities stare back at us.

Paul’s writing, “I can do” suggests at the very least there were many things he could not do. Try though he did – with much persuasion and candor – to endear himself to everyone in the Corinthian church, he simply could not succeed with some of those folks. We know from the Book of Acts, Paul wounded his young protégé Mark and sent him packing. Did I say that tact was probably not Paul’s long suit? Write it down both for Paul and everyone else: no one is omni-competent. There are some things you and I do quite well and some things we do poorly. Contentment lives in the person who knows his or her limits. In fact, deep nourishing soul contentment finds tender root in our egos when we accept who we are by embracing the person God created us to be.

Paul then continues his script by writing, “I can do all things through Christ.” “All things” sounds presumptuous and almost arrogant.
doesn’t it? Surely Paul did not think he was capable of doing “all things”? Remember, none of us are omni-competent. Hear the entire phrase: “all things through Christ”. The preposition here translated “through” can also be understood as “in” or “by” or “because of”, even “belonging to.” Paul was not boasting about some super-human power he had, but rather humbly stating that because he was “in Christ” and belonged to Christ, all that Christ called him to do was within his ability.

So what does Christ call us to do and to be? In a word, Christ calls us to be faithful. Though he only alludes to the Philippians’ generous offering brought to him by their member Epaphroditus, Paul commends the church for being Christ’s faithful presence there in the city of Philippi. Earlier in the letter, he commends the church for the witness they continue to bear in that place, punctuating his sentences with words like “joy” and “rejoicing.” These early Christians faithfully supported Paul and now Paul, by his letter, was faithfully standing with them in their common life.
As we noted a few weeks back, there is a same-ness to the Christian life that is both nourishing and challenging. Like the liturgy used for our worship, the same-ness of following Christ is discovered in the varying and challenging experiences tossed our way because we follow Christ. Like Paul, there are times when life’s circumstances might destroy our highest dreams. And yes, there are moments when our hearts cannot contain the joy of holding a new baby or dancing with one’s newly wed mate or celebrating a birthday. We live our days between these extremes of poverty and wealth, satisfaction and hunger.

The same-ness shows up between life’s extremes, reminding us that no matter what comes our way, God calls us to simple faithfulness. Persons who struggle with the mental illness of bipolar disorder will tell you that life in the center – with the extreme of depression on one side and the exhaustion of being manic on the other—is what they long to know. Ah, what such a person would not give to know the contentment of same-ness.
Faithfulness is like that. Christian faithfulness finds its origins in all our lives when we first embrace the “I” of who God made us to be. It then takes on a life of its own when we finally learn that through Jesus Christ, no matter what life may bring our way, “all things” are possible. Why today, you and I have God’s prescription in our hands to discover and live in the place called contentment. All we really need is Jesus Christ: his love, his grace, his way of seeing life and our world, his way of living with others. Our Lord has been faithful to us in his life, death and resurrection. We are now invited to live faithfully with him.

So today, Jesus writes a prescription for every one of us. The medicine and dosage stares us in the face. “I can do all things through Christ who gives me strength.” Live in Christ’s strength. Love in Christ’s strength. Offer grace and forgiveness in Christ’s strength. Serve in Christ’s strength. Give in Christ’s strength. In such living and giving, we will know a deep contentment whose source is God and whose gift is life. Such is the gift of grace given us in Christ that leads to a life of contentment and deep spiritual peace.