

Monday, November 20. Read 1 Timothy 6:7-19. The apostle Paul wrote to his protégé Timothy that the truest measure of the good life is not material, but spiritual. He didn't want the often short-lived joys of material wealth to blind Timothy or the members of his church to God, "who richly provides" for our well-being. Then as now, even some Christians placed their hope first on their financial wealth. Paul urged Timothy to teach them "to be rich in the good things they do, to be generous, and to share with others." That led, he said, to what is truly life. Pastor Gary Demarest wrote, "Consumerism is an infectious lifestyle, and most of us American Christians are more deeply infected than we realize or admit." Then he asked, "Is our trust in God limited only to "spiritual" things, or is He the Lord of all of life? Does God really promise to provide for our necessities? What are necessities? At what point do we cease expanding our 'needs' list? How much is enough?" Verse 19 said generosity, sharing and a wealth of good deeds allow God's people to "take hold of what is truly life" Has an inner emptiness, or some kind of life crisis, ever driven you to reexamine your idea of what is "truly life"? What moments have you had that let you know that generosity and sharing are key aspects of a life truly worth living?

Tuesday, November 21. Read Genesis 14:19-20, 28:16-22, Malachi 3:7-10. The idea of giving one-tenth of our increase to God (it's often called by the older English word "tithe") didn't start in a church finance office. Genesis said Abraham and Jacob his grandson responded to God's presence in their lives by giving back one-tenth to God in ways that fit their time and place. After Israel's return from exile in Babylon, the prophet Malachi said that Israelites who clung to all their resources were "robbing God." Israel was a largely agricultural society. Their resources were mainly livestock and crops. They didn't have checking accounts, credit cards or 401K balances. Does our situation today make it easier or harder to decide what percentage of our increase we choose to give to causes that honor God? In what ways does giving as a percentage of income, rather than as a flat amount, create greater fairness in how the range of people who make up the "body of Christ" support God's work? Giving one-tenth was a guideline, not a law. But passages like Deuteronomy 15:7-11 and Proverbs 11:23-28 also make it clear that one-tenth was meant more as a floor for giving than as a ceiling. It was important in moving God's people toward a good life because it made the principle of generosity concrete. Do your financial records, whatever the specific amounts or percentages involved, bear clear witness to your faith and commitment to God?

Wednesday, November 22. Read Luke 14:7-14, Philippians 2:5-11. For Jesus, generosity was not just about giving money. It was an attitude that touched all of life. In Luke 14, he wasn't giving advice on a clever way to make yourself look good to others. Consistent with all of his life and teaching, he urged people to avoid selfishly pushing for their own recognition and advantage, to leave room for honoring others. Paul quoted an early Christian hymn to the Philippians that said Jesus built his life on values at odds with much of his (and our) culture. Have you ever known (or maybe even been) a person like the ones Jesus noticed who "sought out the best seats at the table"? In what ways can that attitude show itself in school, games, the workplace, even church work? What's the difference between healthy assertiveness, so that you can use your gifts to bless others, and the kind of self-promotion Jesus warned against? Think about ads you've seen or heard in the last week that use phrases like "you deserve it," "you're worth it," and so on. The early Christian hymn Paul quoted said Jesus "emptied himself" (verse 7). How did Jesus' values differ from the ones Rome and Greece (and much of 21st -century America) thought make for a good, "successful" life? In the light of history, do you believe Jesus was well-meaning but naïve—or was he right?

Thursday, November 23. Read Matthew 20:20-28. Jesus kept talking about the Kingdom of heaven, his Kingdom. Weren't "kingdoms" about power, about who held the most powerful positions? James and John (and probably their mom, though Mark didn't mention her in Mark 10:35-45) thought they'd be smart, and make their bid for power before the other disciples. "You don't know what you are asking," Jesus said. In Heaven's Kingdom, there is no status seeking. In my Kingdom, we serve. We know (as James and John did) what earthly importance, power and privilege look like. Down deep, most of us would like to have at least some of those things. But Jesus' teaching was clear: "that's not the way it will be with you." Jesus said he didn't come to be served, but to serve, and even give his life. In what specific ways does choosing to follow Jesus change your approach to life? Jesus told James and John, "You WILL drink from my cup." James was the first apostle martyred (Acts 12:2). On the other hand, Christian tradition said John, serving and writing, lived for many years, probably longer than any other apostle. In what ways did John, as well as James, "drink from Jesus' cup"? In what ways, if any, has your life so far called on you to do that?

Friday, November 24. Read John 10:7-15 Shepherds occupied one of the lowest social rungs in Jesus' day. So Jesus chose a rather daring metaphor when he called himself "the good shepherd." But his words strongly echoed those of the prophet Ezekiel (cf. Ezekiel 34:1-16) in which God promised Israel that he would shepherd them himself. Jesus came as "the good shepherd" who would safely guide and protect all who trusted him. He offered them life to the fullest. And, as a good shepherd, he found the deepest meaning and joy for his own life by leading his flock safely and well. "I am the good shepherd" is, of course, a metaphor. Based on what you know about shepherds, in what ways is Jesus most like a shepherd? Sheep aren't capable of caring for themselves—they have to trust their shepherd for well-being and safety. But humans aren't sheep—we have to choose to trust. What influences and experiences have moved you toward trusting Jesus to be your shepherd? When have you experienced Jesus as your shepherd? In what ways do you most need him to shepherd you today?