Sermon Week 1

John Wesley, the founder of Methodism spoke often and at great length about money. In his sermon on the topic he outlined three guiding principles:

1. We ought to gain all we can but this it is certain—we ought not to do; we ought not to gain money at the expense of life, nor at the expense of our health.

2. Do not throw precious talent into the sea.

3. Having, First, gained all you can, and, Secondly saved all you can, then “give all you can.” <http://gbgm-umc.org/umw/wesley/serm-050.stm>

John Wesley lived this sermon out by limiting his expenses to what it took to keep his basic needs met while teaching at Oxford University. He was given a salary of thirty pounds a year, which provided a comfortable living for a single man. When first taking the position he enjoyed the money, a huge difference from the poverty he had grown up with. Something happened to change this: Wesley had just finished paying for some pictures for his room when one of the chambermaids came to his door. It was a cold winter day, and he noticed that she had nothing to protect her except a thin lien gown. He reached into his pocket to give her some money to buy a coat but found he had too little left. Immediately the thought struck him that the Lord was not please with the way he had spent his money. He asked himself, “*Will thy master say, ‘Well done, good and faithful steward?’ Thou has adorned they walls with the money which might have screened this poor creature from the cold! O justice! O mercy! Are not these pictures the blood of this poor maid?”* <http://saintluther.blogspot.com/2007/05/about-money-john-wesley.html>. For the rest of his life, Wesley endeavored to live on his original salary so that the more he made, the more he could give away. Even when his earnings for a 1400 pounds, he lived on the thirty pounds and gave away all the rest. Wesley believed that what should rise is not the Christian’s standard of living, but the standard of giving.

In my grandfather’s dying days we did all that we could to honor his wishes that he not go to the hospital. My father and his brother, along with the nine grandchildren took turns staying with him through the days and nights. We tried to keep up his habits for him. His coffee pot was set up to his specifications...the Borden’s sweetened condensed milk can with it’s specially made lid right where it belonged; his TV shows switched on at the right times and the drapes opened and closed at the appointed hours. My grandfather had some very definite routines. On one of the last nights we were able to keep him at home my brother and I were settling things for the night. We asked him if he needed anything else. My grandfather looked around and everything and ended on our faces and said: “No, I have everything I need.” We knew he was not speaking of any of his things, but of his family.

I offer those two thoughts as we begin our sermon series based on Adam Hamilton’s book, *“Enough, Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity.”* If you haven’t been able to get the book, there are still copies for $5.00 and they will be available after worship this morning. We will be looking at this book through October 11th and then have a series of small group discussions during the week of the 11th. In the coming weeks you will have an opportunity to sign up for one of the group discussions. First, let me say upfront, I do not believe that we can live as Wesley did. He had no family to support, no children to put through college and economic realities did not change as quickly as they do today. The inflation rate from 1700 to 1800 hundred in England averaged half a percent! (http://repec.org/sed2005/up.18111.1105728835.pdf) Our realities are quite different from those in Wesley’s time, but the fundamental thinking he proposed does give us a way to keep perspective on what we tend to accumulate: *“what should rise is not the Christian’s standard of living, but the standard of giving.”*

Stuff complicates our lives. In the book, Enough, Hamilton talks of the American Dream turning into the American Nightmare. The concept of the American Dream was first proposed by James Truslow Adams in 1931. The American Dream he said is: *"that dream of a land in which life should be better and richer and fuller for everyone, with opportunity for each according to ability or achievement. It is a difficult dream for the European upper classes to interpret adequately, and too many of us ourselves have grown weary and mistrustful of it. It is not a dream of motor cars and high wages merely, but a dream of social order in which each man and each woman shall be able to attain to the fullest stature of which they are innately capable, and be recognized by others for what they are, regardless of the fortuitous circumstances of birth or position."* (<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/James_Truslow_Adams>) Today the American Dream for many has become the American Nightmare as more and more the dream is interpreted as a dream of accumulating more and more stuff in a culture that screams you can buy your way to happiness. Three observations: One--An August 16th article in the New York Times reported on believers getting rich. *“Onstage and before thousands of believers weighed down by dept and economic insecurity, Kenneth and Gloria Copeland and their all-star lineup of ‘prosperity gospel’ preachers delighted the crowd with anecdotes about the luxurious lives they had attained by following the Word of God. Private airplanes and boats. A motorcycle sent by an anonymous supporter. Vacations in Hawaii and cruises in Alaska. Designer handbags. A ring of emeralds and diamonds. ‘God knows where the money is, and he knows how to get the money to you,’ preached Mrs. Copland. (*<http://www.nytimes.com/2009/08/16/us/16gospel.html?_r=3>) Two—just down the street from us there is a store that advertises to our “stuff addiction.” Fittingly it is called *The Shoe Addict* and its slogan is—all the stuff you just gotta have. Third—as we attended the 9/11 observances at Ground Zero I couldn’t help but notice the latest Kenneth Cole ads that urged people to buy more stuff, by saying to do so was patriotic for to buy would stimulate our economy. His ads say: “American needs you to buy,” and on his designer bags: “I pledge allegiance to the bag.”

*“For what will it profit them if they gain the whole world but forfeit their life? Or what will they give in return for their life?”* That is the question that Jesus poses in the 16th chapter of Matthew. It is a reminder that contrary to the message of the Copeland’s and other prosperity preachers, we can not accumulate enough stuff to save our souls. The more we try to unthinkingly accumulate, the more we get ourselves living beyond our means, the more we are convinced we have to have the latest and greatest…the further we will get from living in Christ and pursuing God’s will. For all of these things will weigh us down and keep us from being open to God’s word and desires for us. The stuff in and of itself is not bad or wrong…it is when it gets in the way of God that it becomes detrimental to our souls. As I have been reading and living with the concepts in Hamilton’s book over the past couple of months I have found myself being more thoughtful about finances and what I purchase. In the back of the book is a key tag similar to the ones many of us have for grocery stores and the like. That key tag has joined the Foodtown, and Wegeman’s and gym and book store tag on my key chain. This tag is labeled Contentment and I have come to pray its prayer through the day: *“Lord, help me to be grateful for what I have, to remember that I don’t need most of what I want, and that joy is found in simplicity and generosity.”* If you have read the first chapter of the book you will know the story of Hamilton’s attempt to buy the latest Apple iPhone. That incident has changed the way I am currently making a purchase. Ever since borrowing the Foster’s TomTom last September I really want, and can convince myself that I need a GPS device. After all I do travel around a lot and such a device would come in handy in finding my way to new destinations. And how much fun is it to get the systems to tell you that you are going the wrong way—there is something about hearing “re-calculating,” or when it really feels you have made a gross directional error “turn around at the first opportunity.” I didn’t do anything about purchasing a GPS and have made do with mapquest and old fashioned directions. But, then we went to Kentucky in July and there was the TomTom again. I really, really thought it is time. Enter the story of Hamilton’s attempt to buy an iPhone. It changed how I am going about buying the system. Instead of going right out and purchasing a GPS, I’ve been saving for one. Each day when I have a dollar or two left in my pocket I’ve been putting it aside. In the meantime, old fashioned directions will do. In the month plus that I’ve been doing this I have accumulated $153. I’m getting there… Yes, it is a simple thing and I probably could have just outright purchased a GPS. But this process has made me more thoughtful about possessions and how they can get in the way of God.

At the end of each chapter in Enough there are exercises to go through. I encourage you to spend some time doing them as part of your daily devotions. Let them be a kind of spiritual check up for you…helping you find the places you where you are doing well, and celebrating those places, but also helping you find the places where you need to do some work. Remember John Wesley’s encounter with the chambermaid and how he shamefully realized he could not help her? Through your days ask: Where is God calling me to a simpler life so that I have the resources and freedom to be generous when the chambermaids of the world come my way?

The words of a hymn remind us: “*Tis the gift to be simple, ‘tis the gift to be free, ‘tis the gift to come down where we ought to be. And when we find ourselves in the place just right, ‘twill be in the valley of love and delight. When true simplicity is gain’d, to bow and to bend we shan’t be ashamed, to turn, turn will be our delight, till by turning, turning we come out right.”*

Sermon Week 2

Psalm 19:7-14

7The law of the Lord is perfect, reviving the soul; the decrees of the Lord are sure, making wise the simple;

8the precepts of the Lord are right, rejoicing the heart; the commandment of the Lord is clear, enlightening the eyes;

9the fear of the Lord is pure, enduring forever; the ordinances of the Lord are true and righteous altogether.

10More to be desired are they than gold, even much fine gold; sweeter also than honey, and drippings of the honeycomb.

11Moreover by them is your servant warned; in keeping them there is great reward.

12But who can detect their errors? Clear me from hidden faults.

13Keep back your servant also from the insolent; do not let them have dominion over me. Then I shall be blameless, and innocent of great transgression.

14Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable to you, O Lord, my rock and my redeemer.

Luke 15:11-16

11Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. 12The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. 13A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living. 14When he had spent everything, a severe famine took place throughout that country, and he began to be in need. 15So he went and hired himself out to one of the citizens of that country, who sent him to his fields to feed the pigs. 16He would gladly have filled himself with the pods that the pigs were eating; and no one gave him anything.

Some of us grew up on Aesop’s Fables, a vast collection of short tales reportedly written by a Greek slave in the 620 and 560 BCE. In reading the second chapter of Enough I am reminded by this tale: *“In a field one summer’s day a Grasshopper was hopping about, chirping and singing to its heart’s content. An Ant passed by, bearing along with great toil an ear of corn he was taking to the next. ‘Why not come and chat with me,’ said the Grasshopper, ‘instead of toiling and moiling in that way?’ ‘I am helping to lay up food for the winter,’ said the Ant, ‘and recommend you do the same’ ‘Why bother about winter?’ said the Grasshopper, ‘we have got plenty of food at present.’ But the Ant went on its way and continued its toil. When the winter came the Grasshopper had no food, and found itself dying of hunger, while it saw the ants distributing every day corn and grain from the stores they had collected in the summer. Then the Grasshopper knew: It is best to prepare for the days of necessity.”*

In Willie Wonka and the Chocolate Factory we meet Veruca Salt. She has grown up getting everything she wants, as soon as she wants it. She gets her golden ticket to visit the chocolate factory because her father shuts down production in one of his factories so his workers can open Wonka bars until they find a golden ticket. In the chocolate factory her spoiled greed catches up with her—as, depending on which version you are watching or reading, Veruca demands to have the golden egg laying geese or a pet squirrel from the nut room...and after being told she can’t have one, her temper tantrum sends her down the garbage shoot.

*“Then Jesus said, “There was a man who had two sons. The younger of them said to his father, ‘Father, give me the share of the property that will belong to me.’ So he divided his property between them. A few days later the younger son gathered all he had and traveled to a distant country, and there he squandered his property in dissolute living.”*

In the parable of the prodigal son, we find both the Grasshopper and Veruca Salt—live only for the moment and I want it and I want it now! We live in a society that fosters the idea that we are here to consume and to consume as much as we can, a society that seems to support the grasshoppers and Veruca’s...we have to keep up with the proverbial Joneses. Our culture tells us in effect that our life purpose is acquisition and the more the better...and in many ways we have allowed culture to dictate our habits in this area. We have become a prodigal people.

The second chapter of our study book *Enough* calls us to think about this issue from the perspective of who we are as God’s people, what our calling as God’s people is about, how we live as the people who have accepted the call to follow Jesus. From the very beginning we are told what our purpose is. As the story of creation is recorded in Genesis God gives us the responsibility to care for all that God made. That responsibility needs to filter through how and what we acquire and consume. As a congregation we are seriously committed to this God given responsibility—a commitment that has led the leadership of the church to become the first United Methodist congregation to be accepted into the Green Faith certification process. In the theological statement I wrote for this process we are reminded of our God-created responsibility: *In the beginning God spoke and all that is was called into being. Out of the void, out of chaos creation happened. The book of Genesis records this creation in two different stories, one a story about the goodness of all creation, the second a story of brokenness. This brokenness is told through the story of Adam and Eve. God created human beings and gave us power over all creation. This is a power, I believe, that calls us to be keepers of God’s creation in ways that continue the goodness that God saw in creation.*

*The church is the body of Christ, and as such we are charged with living in ways that show others God’s love and power. A part of this is how we treat the created order. How we care for the environment, the decisions we make about what we will use, what we will consume are statements on how well we live out the mandate found in the first story of creation.*

*As a part of our task we acknowledge our failures, finding our story in the brokenness of Adam and Eve’s experiences. We admit to participating in the destruction of our environment, overusing resources, and not caring for things as well as we should.*

*The United Methodist Church of Red Bank has pledged to become a Green Faith congregation. We will strive to take seriously God’s charge to humanity that was begun in creation. We will acknowledge the ways we have participated in the bringing about the current state of our environment. With God’s help we will work towards reversing such destructive habits and patterns not only at an individual level, but also on systemic levels.*

Individually we are also called to consider what our purpose and calling is in life. The Westminster Catechism was developed in the 1600’s to educate lay persons in matters of doctrine and belief. It is set in a simple question and answer format. The first question is the most famous and also most pertinent for our purpose this morning: “What is the chief end of humanity?” “Humanity's chief end is to glorify God, and to enjoy God forever.” That is the question that should inform our living, and in particular, inform how we use our financial resources. Practically speaking, in order to do this we have to have our financial houses in order. Otherwise we will be bogged down in dealing with them and not be able to live out who we are called to be as God’s people. Another way of looking at that how Hamilton puts it in his resource guide on Enough: “We have a life purpose that is greater than our own self-interest, and how we spend our God-given resources reflects our understanding and commitment to this life purpose or mission.” (Enough Stewardship Guide, page 73)

As the people who have accepted that Jesus is our savior and the example we will follow we take seriously that we are called to serve him—in his example we reach out to caring for others, being part of mission work...and through every day opportunities. And lest we think that a discussion of wealth and finances is inappropriate in that calling...take a tour through Jesus’ teachings. About the things the church tends to worry most about, particularly issues of sexuality, Jesus had little to say...it is wealth and money that he speaks of most...perhaps knowing that how we deal with money will ultimately say most about where our hearts truly are.

You have a number of resources this morning to give yourself a financial check up. The bulletin insert is from the end of Chapter 2 in Enough, as you leave worship this morning you will receive a static cling reminding you of the Financial Planning Principles also detailed there. Use these as guides to see where you are doing well, where you need to do some adjusting...all with the understanding we do this so we might be clear about the ways in which God is calling us, and the purposes to which we are called as followers of Jesus the Christ.

**God, you know what we don’t even know.**

**We don’t know where every dime went,**

**but somehow you know what we did with all that we had,**

**last year and the year before that.**

**You don’t forbid us from having joy in our possessions.**

**In fact, you delight in having joy for us.**

**But what you know is that just acquiring**

**more and more stuff isn’t where we find joy.**

**Lord, forgive us for being wasteful, for being prodigals.**

**Forgive us for leveraging our future in order to have pleasure in the present.**

**And help us to be good managers of the talents you’ve given to us.**

**Help us to be generous and willing to share**

**and focused on accomplishing your purposes for our lives.**

**In Jesus’ name, Amen.**

Sermon Week 3

Philippians 4:4-13

Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near. Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus. Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honorable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.

I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me.

Luke 12:15-31

And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.” Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, ‘Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’ But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’ So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

He said to his disciples, “Therefore I tell you, do not worry about your life, what you will eat, or about your body, what you will wear. For life is more than food, and the body more than clothing. Consider the ravens: they neither sow nor reap, they have neither storehouse nor barn, and yet God feeds them. Of how much more value are you than the birds! And can any of you by worrying add a single hour to your span of life? If then you are not able to do so small a thing as that, why do you worry about the rest? Consider the lilies, how they grow: they neither toil nor spin; yet I tell you, even Solomon in all his glory was not clothed like one of these. But if God so clothes the grass of the field, which is alive today and tomorrow is thrown into the oven, how much more will he clothe you—you of little faith! And do not keep striving for what you are to eat and what you are to drink, and do not keep worrying. For it is the nations of the world that strive after all these things, and your Father knows that you need them. Instead, strive for his kingdom, and these things will be given to you as well.

*“Jesus said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”*

As we look at the topic for this morning, “cultivating contentment,” I am reminded of a prayer that John Wesley adapted to be used for renewal services. In the prayer we find these words: *“I am not longer my own, but thine. Put me to what thou wilt, rank me with whom thou wilt. Put me to doing, put me to suffering. Let me be employed by thee or laid aside for thee, exalted for thee or brought low by thee. Let me be full, let me be empty. Let me have all things, let me have nothing. I freely and heartily yield all things to thy pleasure and disposal.”* A pretty courageous prayer! And words appropriate to the discussion of true contentment.

In contrast to that ideal of contentment, of resting in God, is the prevailing winds of our culture. Let’s call it the pursuit of the bottomless acquisition pit—meaning that we have been caught up in trying to fill the void, the holes in our restless souls with all the things we can in hopes that this will lead us to contentment. It is a pursuit that blinds us from what is already in our midst, immobilizes us from action...makes us think we don’t have enough to get anything done. A small example: Years ago, when my son Daniel was 7 or 8 he had a day off from school and was spending some time at the church office. We had gotten a new filing cabinet and were trying to put the hardware together for the hanging file folders. They were meant to be fitted for a number of different sized drawers and so the length of the metal rods was too long. We thought we were stuck because we didn’t have a saw. Daniel kept insisting we had all the tools we needed, but we kept on wondering who we could call that might have the necessary saw. Persistently he told us we didn’t need one, we already had what we needed. All we could see was a hammer and a flat head screw driver. He finally showed us that we could score the metal by using the tools at hand and then bend it apart. How many times have you been convinced you couldn’t get something done because you were unable to see all the gifts already in your midst...instead focusing on all that you didn’t have?

Unfortunately, it sometimes takes a disaster for us to know that everything we have is temporary. Having been at the aftermath of a few natural disasters I have witnessed how ugly our possessions become, particularly after flooding. Last Sunday, we prayed for Rory Stout who is already in New Orleans to work in the ninth ward that is still recovering from Hurricane Katrina. My daughter was in that area last October and was struck by how little had been cleaned up—finding that people had simply run from the flooding and never came back...refrigerators still filled with rotting food, and all their possessions covered with mud and mold through the house. Earlier this week I was talking to a couple from the Los Angeles area, telling them about the video segment we will be seeing later on the California fires. Turns out they had been very close to the fires and on evacuation alert...they’d already had to think through what they would take if they had to run. If you had minutes to get out from your home, what would you take?

We are a discontent people...suffering from as our study book says—Restless Heart Syndrome...we are never satisfied, going from one thing to the next...scarcely enjoying something before wanting something more. First let me remind us that not all discontentment is detrimental for us. God has made us to be constantly pursuing God. There’s a beautiful hymn that expresses that: *“As the deer pants for the water, so my soul longs after you. You alone are my heart’s desire, and I long to worship you. You alone are my strength my shield, to you alone may my spirit yield. You alone are my heart’s desire, and I long to worship you.” (FWS #2025)* We are designed to be always striving after the things of God, wanting more and more of God’s presence in our lives.

All too often instead of that healthy discontentment, we find ourselves in the hopeless kind of discontent...‘the grass is always greener on the other side, nothing I have is good enough, if only I had what she has’ kind of discontent. What in your life needs adjusting in order to pursue God’s purpose for you?

I would suggest the first place to start is what parents often call “attitude adjustment.” You know that place...when your heart is just in a snit about everything you have and everything you don’t have, and all that is wrong with your life. Hamilton reminds us of the Presbyterian pastor that says, “whenever we find ourselves discontented with something or someone say: It could be worse.” Monty Python would sing it in his song from “The Life of Brian”—always look on the bright side of life. The beautiful words we read this morning from Philippians were written from Paul’s prison cell in Rome as he waited news of his possible execution. As we learn to look on the bright side we also develop gratefulness for all the gifts we have instead of always focusing on what is wrong.

In our attitude adjustment we need to figure out how God is calling us specifically to pursue true satisfaction. We gather as the church—those who have decided to follow Jesus. But, for each one of us that happens in specific ways. Again, God has made our souls restless in our constant pursuit to find God...but if we get so caught up in hopeless discontent we will never discover the depths of who and what God has created us to be. All through the seasons of our lives it is our task to be pursuing God’s tasks for us, deepening our spirituality, plumbing the depths of God’s love for us...discovering how God calls us to be in love with the world, relentlessly seeking justice for all.

If we are to be serious about this pursuit of true contentment, we’ve got to find the time and place for it...and we have to simplify lives that are overcomplicated with too many things to do and too much stuff to keep track of. What are you willing to do, what are you willing to change, what are you willing to give up in order to, as Jesus put it: “love the Lord your God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind, and love your neighbor as your self?”

If you are reading along in “Enough” you found some suggestions about where to begin in this pursuit. First, reduce consumption...something that as a congregation we are taking seriously as we seek to be a Green Faith sanctuary. I love the questions as we make a purchase—do I really need this, and why do I want this...I would hook on to that an earlier question—for how long will this make me happy? Remember when you were a child and you just had to have a certain toy or the newest game? Bugging your parents over and over again that this was the one thing you just had to have...telling them you’d be happy for the rest of your life if you only had this one thing? Where is that toy now? Our adult desires for gadgets and the like are not really much different.

Entertainment. Some of you know I’m a big fan of instant parties. Rather than spend a lot of time cooking and the like, I will call a group of people together and invite them over, asking them to bring an appetizer to share. No one is too frazzled, and we get to spend some time in good company. My family has taken to celebrating Christmas in a way that is an extension of that idea. Ministers are busy that time of year and on top of it everyone is going all out for celebrations. Years ago I stopped trying to do it all. Now, we celebrate Christmas on what is known as Twelfth Night. Our holiday “deadline” is no longer December 25th, but January 5th. It’s a lot less stress this way...and a good way to take real advantage of the after Christmas sales! We United Methodists know how to throw the simplest and best party of all—covered dish dinners!

As we examine all that we do in our lives, the question becomes whether our restless hearts are restless for God, or have we given in and become restless for things that will never fill us to our heart’s content. Strive for true simplicity that your hearts might freely pursue the abundance of God’s love for you and others.

Again we are reminded by our Gospel text—life does not consist of the abundance of our possessions. Watch for the next few moments a video clip of Adam Hamilton reminding us of this truth.

Sermon Week 4

17As he was setting out on a journey, a man ran up and knelt before him, and asked him, “Good Teacher, what must I do to inherit eternal life?” 18Jesus said to him, “Why do you call me good? No one is good but God alone. 19You know the commandments: ‘You shall not murder; You shall not commit adultery; You shall not steal; You shall not bear false witness; You shall not defraud; Honor your father and mother.’” 20He said to him, “Teacher, I have kept all these since my youth.” 21Jesus, looking at him, loved him and said, “You lack one thing; go, sell what you own, and give the money to the poor, and you will have treasure in heaven; then come, follow me.” 22When he heard this, he was shocked and went away grieving, for he had many possessions.

23Then Jesus looked around and said to his disciples, “How hard it will be for those who have wealth to enter the kingdom of God!” 24And the disciples were perplexed at these words. But Jesus said to them again, “Children, how hard it is to enter the kingdom of God! 25It is easier for a camel to go through the eye of a needle than for someone who is rich to enter the kingdom of God.” 26They were greatly astounded and said to one another, “Then who can be saved?” 27Jesus looked at them and said, “For mortals it is impossible, but not for God; for God all things are possible.”

28Peter began to say to him, “Look, we have left everything and followed you.” 29Jesus said, “Truly I tell you, there is no one who has left house or brothers or sisters or mother or father or children or fields, for my sake and for the sake of the good news, 30who will not receive a hundredfold now in this age—houses, brothers and sisters, mothers and children, and fields with persecutions—and in the age to come eternal life. 31But many who are first will be last, and the last will be first.”

*As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.*

*(I Timothy 6:17-19)*

A Native American grandfather is talking to his young grandson. He tells the boy he has two wolves inside of him struggling with each other. The first is the wolf of peace, love and kindness. The other wolf is fear, greed and hatred. "Which wolf will win, grandfather?" asks the young boy. "Whichever one I feed," is the reply.

This morning is the final chapter in our series on the book “Enough.” This final chapter asks us to make a choice about what will define us. In the opening paragraphs of this chapter Hamilton talks about meeting with family members after a death to plan their loved ones funerals. When I meet with families I do something very similar to what he describes. Often, I am called on to do a funeral for someone I’ve never met. Even if I know the person, there is always more to know. And so, as we work through the service I ask the family to tell me a story about the person that defines who they were. The stories are beautiful, touching and teary...and paint well the defining characteristics of someone’s life. By what...for what will you be known?

One of the defining characteristics of the earliest Christian communities was their generosity. Several passages in the book of Acts which records much about the formation of early Christianity speaks about how when the Christians came together everything was shared, possessions were held in common and no one was needy. It was a behavior that caused observers of the community to exclaim in amazement: “Who are these people.”

Another reminder goes all the way back to creation. We human beings were created in the very image of God. We know God to be generous, generous if one could say this about God...generous to a fault. One of the most beautiful hymns speaks of God’s generosity—“How Great Thou Art.” Think of those words... “O Lord my God! When I in awesome wonder consider all the worlds they hands have made...and then in the ultimate act of generosity...And when I think that God, his son not sparing.” Love poured out for us...without price, lavishly bestowed on all humanity. In the image of God we were created...hard wired to be rich in generosity. Our baptismal vows remind us of how we keep our lives in line so that we are reflecting God’s love and generosity. We profess Jesus Christ as our Lord and Savior...we declare that it is in his example we will reach out to the world.

So much gets in the way of that, though, doesn’t it? That other “wolf” starts taking over...the voice that Adam and Eve heard in the garden, tempting them away from the goodness of God’s love for them. We hear the voices of fear...that we will not have enough left for “me” if I am generous. We hear the voices of culture which tell us that life does consist in the abundance of our possessions. Pretty soon, that’s about all we can hear and we become hoarders....we miserly share what we have, even to the point of doling out our love. We even hear the voices of some preachers... the so-called “wealth” preachers. Their message is that if you give to their programs God will give you wealth in return. And they are sometimes very specific about the amount they want you to give. Early this week I was watching one such show that was broadcasting from Jerusalem. They wanted their viewers to call and give nine hundred dollars and for that gift the money would start pouring in. As we let those voices crowd our thinking we reach the point where we exist only to please ourselves...and we are miserable. We give from the left-overs and not from the bounty.

The Bible speaks of how we are called to be generous in the concept of tithing. Most of the time we can’t get past the word because we think about that ten percent thing and say, “I can’t do that.” While tithing as a goal of giving ten percent is a good goal to have in mind...tithing is also about how we give to God...again is it our left-overs or the best. Remember the ten apple story in our book study? David Slagle illustrated with apples a way to think of this concept. And we have ten apples this morning. Think of all that you have as these ten apples. Nine of them, says God, are yours. But one of them is mine....it is meant to be given to express your thanks to me, and I will use it to continue my loving purposes in the world. But what happens so often is this. We look at those apples and figure that nine of them are not enough...how can we do it all and still give away one whole apple. So we start thinking...well, maybe if I take a little off this top apple for this year’s Christmas presents we forgot to save for...and then, oops, God will understand how much we really need to get away on a vacation....and then, how bout this and how bout that. Oops...the apple is down to the core...not much left...Lord, here is your apple.

Contrast that with the giving story of Rev. David Henritzy. He shares that years ago he changed his giving mentality. Time was when he sat down to pay his bills, etc and wrote the checks for gas, electric, phone and all the rest first and then saw what was left...and paid his church pledge. He got to thinking...this isn’t how it is supposed to be. And so, with a deep breath and a leap of faith he started writing the check for his church pledge first. That practice has given him a whole new perspective on what it truly means to be generous and he reports it has always worked.

God calls us to be generous as God is generous...to give our best and be our best. To live a life that is defined by generosity to the point that as others observe us they are moved to ask in awe—who is this person, who are these people. What story will be told of your life?

Let us pray: “Oh God, we thank you that you have given us life, that you sustain us by the power of your Holy Spirit and that gave Jesus Christ as an offering for us. We thank you for the abundance that we have in our lives. And we pray that you would help us. Help us, oh Lord, to honor you with our tithes. Help us to care for the poor and those who are in need. Help us to recognize that it is truly more blessed to give than to receive. We offer ourselves to you. Help us to do your will. Lead us, we pray, in the example of Jesus Christ our Lord. Amen (Enough Stewardship Program Guide. page 89)

**Cultivating Contentment**

*Lk 12:13-21*

Contentment.

Wikapedia defines contentment as:

* An Experience of satisfaction
* Being at ease
* Peace of mind
* Mental and emotional satisfaction.

The question I’d like to challenge each us to ponder throughout this week is:

“What brings you contentment?

What brings you Satisfaction?

What brings you peace of mind?

Can you picture it? What immediately came to mind for you?

Perhaps it was an object…or a relationship…

Maybe it was a feeling…Or was it a possession?

Is it a Goal accomplished…or is it a state of mind?

Is contentment something that happens to you…

Or did you do something to bring it about?

Contentment. For so many it’s all relative I think…

This word has really worked my head and heart this week as I prepared for today’s message…

Wondering what that one word meant to those 33 Chilean miners…

trapped for 69 days in a black hole after the mine collapsed.

How contentment changed from:

* August 4th…the day before the accident…
* To their first night after…not knowing if they’d ever survive…
* To the day they were discovered to be alive…yet told it would be months before they could get out.
* To last Tuesday when the first miner stepped out of the technological miracle capsule dubbed: “The Phoenix”…

What is contentment to them?

How did those 33 men trapped almost 70 days in a dark, dank mine—

possibly experience contentment?

It goes against everything that comes to mind when we think of the word contentment.

Yet the last miner out, Shift Supervisor Luis Urzua said:

“Morale was tough, but we had strength…we had spirit…and we always had hope.

Because of our faith we held on.”

Another said, “All I thought about was my family and my faith in God.”

Still another shared, “Humor and faith got us through.”

Contentment for these men came through an inner spiritual and emotional state…

Certainly not through a physical state.

Focus on faith, family, humor and love is what brought them satisfaction and inner peace.

\*\*My friends…it is so easy to get wrapped up in how the world defines contentment…verses how God defines contentment.

The world says we achieve contentment through a physical state…

While God says contentment is an inner, spiritual state.

But boy…you know…we love our stuff…don’t we?

And our culture tells us our stuff brings us contentment.

In fact, were bombarded with it 24/7 on radio, TV and the Internet.

So while we may agree with the Gospel quote:*“My life does NOT consist in the abundance of possessions.”* (Lk 12:15b), we still find ourselves devoting a great deal of our time, talent and treasure (or resources), and to the acquisition of more stuff.

\*We say that our lives do not consist in the abundance of possessions, but we live as if they do.

Perhaps you’ve heard of restless legs syndrome (RLS), a condition in which one has twitches and contractions in the legs.

Well, Restless Heart Syndrome (RHS) works in a similar way, but in the heart—or soul.

Its primary symptom is discontent.

We find that we are never satisfied with anything.

The moment we acquire something,

we scarcely take time to enjoy it before we want something else.

We are perennially discontent.

There is no peace of mind with Restless Heart Syndrome—

because we’re always struggling with discontent.

~But you know…there is a certain discontent that God intended us to have.

God actually wired our hearts so that they would be discontent with certain things,

causing us to seek the only One who can fully satisfy us.

* We are meant to yearn to know God more,
* To cultivate a deeper prayer life,
* To pursue justice and holiness with increasing fervor,
* To love others more,
* And to grow in grace and character and wisdom with each passing day.

This kind of discontentment is a virtue…helping us become all that God desires of us.

This is the kind of discontentment that I believe the miners experienced…

and out of that tragic event…they sought the only One who can fully satisfy.

They named that prayer, love and care for each other,

finding ways to live in grace and with character in an intolerable situation,

love of family, and their faith and hope in God to see them through…

All brought these men an inner peace and satisfaction born out of their discontentment.

But the problem for us as human beings,

can also be that those things we should be content with…

are sometimes the very things we find ourselves hopelessly discontented with.

For example,

we find ourselves discontent with our stuff, our jobs, our church, our kids, and our spouses.

And when that happens, I think God must look down on us and feel the way we feel…

when we give someone we really care for a special gift…

and he or she asks for the gift receipt.

It’s as if we’re saying to God, “I don’t like what you have given me, Lord;

and I want to trade it in and get something better than what you gave me.”

We all struggle with being discontent…but there is a way to cultivate…

To grow…nurture…strengthen contentment.

The Apostle Paul sets an excellent example of contentment. In his letter to the Philippians, he wrote of the “secret” to his contentment.

*“I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty.*

*In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed*

*and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need.*

*I can do all things through Him (Christ) who strengthens me.”* (Ph 4:12-13)

Like Paul, my friends, we can learn to be content in whatever circumstances we may find ourselves. Four keys, which include the “secret” Paul referred to in his letter, can help us do that.

**~First** is to say to ourselves four simple words. ***“It could be worse.”***

Whenever we find ourselves discontented with something or someone—simply say: “It could be worse.”

This mantra helps us recognize that no matter what we may not like about a thing,

or person, or circumstance, we can always find something good to focus on

if only we will choose to do so.

**~Another key in cultivating contentment is to ask:**

***“For How Long Will This Make Me Happy?”***

So often we buy something, thinking it will make us happy,

only to find that the happiness lasts about as long as it takes to open the box.

There is a moment of satisfaction when we make the purchase,

but the item does not continue to bring satisfaction over a period of time.

Many of the things we buy are simply not worth the expense.

This is why it is a good idea to try before you buy.

But remember, first ask yourself…”For how long will this make me happy?”

~A **third** key to contentment is ***Developing a Grateful Heart***.

The Apostle Paul said that we are to “give thanks in all circumstances.” (1Thess 5:18)

A grateful heart recognizes that all of life is a gift.

Contentment comes when we spend more time giving thanks for what we have…

then thinking about what’s missing or wrong in our lives.

~The **fourth** key is to ask ourselves, ***“Where Does My Soul Find True Satisfaction?”***

The world answers this question by telling us that we find satisfaction in ease and luxury and comfort and money.

The Bible, however, answers the question very differently.

From Genesis to Revelation, it tells us that we find our satisfaction in God alone.

*“As a deer longs for flowing streams, so my soul longs for you, O God.*

*My soul thirsts for God, for the living God.”* Psalm 42:1-2

*“Surely God is my salvation; I will trust, and will not be afraid, for the Lord God is my strength and my might; he has become my salvation.”* (Isaiah 12:2)

And finally, Jesus said the two most important things we must do are to *“Love the Lord you God with all your heart, and with all your soul, and with all your mind,”* and to *“Love your neighbor as yourself.”* (Matthew 22:37, 39)

Jesus reminds us if we keep our focus on these two things,

we will find satisfaction for our souls and lasting contentment.

Cultivating contentment:

* Remembering, “It could be worse”
* Asking “For how long will this make me happy?”
* Developing a grateful heart and
* Seeking true satisfaction from God alone

Rev. Adam Hamilton’s resource “Enough: Discovering Joy through Simplicity and Generosity” is guiding us throughout this month of exploring our stewardship as a spiritual discipline.

He challenges us that in addition to cultivating contentment in our lives, we need to cultivate simplicity. Indeed contentment and simplicity go hand in hand.

So here are some tools he offers to help simplify our lives.

**\*First, He challenges each of us to set a goal of reducing our consumption, and to live below our means.**

Each of us should set a tangible goal to reduce our own personal consumption and the production of waste in our life.

For example:

* Use canvas bags when shopping.
* When making a purchase, look at the mid-range instead of the top-of-the-line product.
* If buying a new car, aim to improve fuel economy over your existing car by at least 10%.
* Reduce your utilities by 10% by setting the thermostat back a couple of degrees when away during the day or asleep at night.

Our challenge as a church and as individuals is to find ways to reduce our consumption and live below our means.

So my friends, do research, share ideas w/others, or have a brainstorming session w/your family

Reduce consumption…live below our means.

**\*Another tool is before making a purchase, honestly ask yourself,**

**“Do I really need this?” AND, “Why do I need this?”**

These questions will help us determine the true motivation of our desired purchase.

Is it a need…A self esteem issue (keeping up with the Jones’)…Or something else?

We may find ourselves wrestling with our true motive and decide that our reason for purchasing the item is not a good one.

**\*Third, and this should be a no-brainer, but I’ll say it anyway:**

**Use up something before buying something new.**

Take good care of the things you buy and use them until they are empty, broken, or worn out.

Buy things that are made to last; and, when buying things that have a short lifespan, spend your money wisely.

**\*A fourth tool to help us simplify our lives is to plan low-cost entertainment that enriches.**

When it comes to choosing entertainment for your family or friends,

plan things that are simple and cheap.

You’ll be amazed at how much more pleasure you derive from low-cost, simple activities.

**\*A final tool is to ask ourselves,**

**“Are there major changes that would allow me to simplify my life?”**

Consider selling a car and buying one you pay for in full, downsizing your home,

or getting rid of a club membership you don’t use.

Ask yourself questions related to your home, possessions, job, and activities

to identify some significant changes that will simplify your life.

Remember, if you cannot do all the things God is calling you to do…

And you are unable to find joy in your life…

Perhaps it’s time to simplify in some major ways.

These are just a few tips to try and help us simplify our lives to bring us joy and contentment.

My friends, cultivating contentment is all about making choices.

So…will you or I choose to live in discontentment…OR…contentment.

You and you alone determine which state of mind will be yours…

and you choose it in large part by deciding what life is about.

\*If you decide that “life does not consist in the abundance of your possessions,”

Then you are choosing contentment.

\*Choosing contentment means we look to God as our Source, giving thanks for what we have.

\*It means we ask God to give us the right perspective on money and possessions and to change our hearts each day.

\*Choosing contentment means we decide to live simpler lives,

wasting less and conserving more.

It means we choose to give more generously.

Then, like Paul, we too can rejoice—

*“For we have learned to be content with whatever we have…*

*because we too know the secret…*

*that we can do all things through Christ who strengthens us.”* (Ph 4:11ff)

Amen and amen.

**Defined By Generosity**

*1Tim 6:17-19*

What defines you?

Is it your family? Or your job? Perhaps for some it is your heritage? Or your gender?

Still for others, your home or the car you drive? The college you attend?

Today I want to challenge each of us to think about what it means to be defined by generosity.

Today’s second scripture reading from 1Timothy 6:17-19,

can help us understand what it means to be defined by generosity.

“As for those who in the present age are rich—

***and compared to the majority of the world…that would include most of us—***

As for those who in the present age are rich—

Command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches,

but rather to set their hopes on God,

who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.

They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share,

thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future,

so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.

This is the Word of God for the people of God…

To be defined by generosity is:

* To do good,
* To be rich in good works,
* Generous and ready to share.

This is what it means to take hold of the life that really is life.

My friends, I think that we were created to be generous.

God created us with the willingness to give—to God and to others.

This design is part of our make-up; we actually have the need to be generous.

Yet there are two voices that “war” against our God-given impulse toward generosity, tempting us to keep or hoard what we have.

The first one is the voice of **fear**…

Fear of what might happen to us, along with a misplaced idea about the true source of our security (which is God), keeps us from being generous and leads us to hoard what we have.

Does anyone remember bomb shelters?

During a time our country was living in fear of communism and nuclear fallout,

people built underground fortresses to ensure their survival.

And people didn’t let anyone know if they had a bomb shelter…

because they didn’t want to share their food and water.

After all, it was your life that mattered…not your neighbors.

Isn’t it amazing to see how fear of what may…or may not…happen to us,

Along with that misplaced idea about the true source of our security,

Both keep us from being generous…and can lead us to hoarding.

\*That’s the voice of fear.

Another voice that wars against our God-given impulse toward generosity

is the voice of self-gratification.

Our culture tells us that our lives consist in the abundance of our possessions and pleasurable experiences.

We talked about this last week…so we find ourselves thinking,

“If I give, there won’t be enough for me.”

And that’s what matters…my needs…my pleasure…me, me, me.

It’s what our culture tells us 24/7 on radio, tv and internet.

But my friends, we **need** to defeat the voices.

When we give our lives to Christ, invite him to be Lord,

and allow the Holy Spirit to begin changing us from the inside out,

we find that our fears begin to fade away…

and our aim in life shifts from seeking personal pleasure…

to pleasing God and caring for others.

Although we still may wrestle with the voices from time to time,

we are able to silence them more easily and effectively the more we grow in Christ.

And the more we grow in Christ, realizing that our lives belong to him,

the more generous we become.

Generosity is a fruit of spiritual growth.

Generosity should define us as Christians.

The Bible gives us endless reasons to give to God and others.

~In the Book of Acts the very first churches tell us that we find more joy in doing things for other people and for God than we ever did in doing things for ourselves.

“It is more blessed to give than to receive.” (Acts 20:35)

~We are also called to follow Christ’s lead, because in the very act of losing our lives, we find life.

\*”For God so loved the world, He gave his only Son…” (Jn 3:16)

\*Jesus gave His very life on the cross,

so that we “…may have life, & have it abundantly.” (Jn 10:10)

\*Jesus challenged all His disciples, “If any want to become my followers, let them deny themselves, and take up their cross and follow me. For those who want to save their life will lose it and those who lose their life for my sake will find it.” (Mt 16:25)

~Life is a gift, and everything belongs to God.

“The earth is the Lord’s and all that is in it, the world, and those who live in it.” (Ps 24:1)

We are wired to be givers…back to God and others!

And there are biblical guidelines for giving to help us figure out what it means to live generously.

From the early days of the Old Testament,

God’s people observed the practice of giving some portion of the best of what they had to God.

A gift offered to God was called the first fruits or the tithe,

and it equaled one-tenth of one’s flocks or crops or income.

Abraham was the first to give a tithe (Genesis 14:20b & 28:18-22).

And in Leviticus 27:30 we’re reminded

“A tenth of the Lord’s produce, whether grain from the ground or fruit from the trees, is God’s.

It is Holy to God.” *(Translation from The Message)*

Now, as Christians who live under the new covenant in and through Jesus Christ,

we are not bound by the Law of Moses, but we look to it as a guide.

Most Christians agree that the tithe is a good guideline for our lives,

and one that is pleasing to God.

Defined by generosity…

Giving One tenth…of the many blessings God gives us—that’s tithing.

And though tithing can be a struggle, it is possible at virtually every income level.

If you cannot tithe right away, I challenge you to take a step in that direction.

Perhaps you can give 2% or 5% or 7%.

God understands where you are, and will help you make the life adjustments necessary

for you to become more and more generous.

Like discussed last week, it’s about simplifying our lives…reducing our consumption,

Asking ourselves “Do I need this?”

Living below our means and

Knowing what truly brings us satisfaction and contentment…

My friends, it is so important to realize what our giving means to God—

That our giving affects God, it affects others and it affects us.

From the earliest biblical times, the primary way people worshipped God was by building an altar and offering the fruit of one’s labors upon it to God.

They would burn the sacrifice of an animal or grain as a way of expressing their gratitude, devotion, and desire to honor God. The scent of the offering was said to be pleasing to God.

It wasn’t that God loved the smell of burnt meat and grain.

Rather, God saw that people were giving a gift that expressed love, faith,

and the desire to please and honor God;

and this moved God’s heart.

When given in this spirit, our offerings bless the Lord.

This is why WE place our offering plates upon the altar…

And as we place our tithes and offerings in the plate each week…

I wonder…do we fully realize what our giving means to God?

And of course our generosity affects US because through it our hearts are changed.

When we are generous—

to God and to our families, friends, neighbors and others who are in need—

our hearts are filled with joy.

They are enlarged by the very act of giving.

When we give generously, we become more generous with everything we have—

including our time, talents and treasure.

Our generosity also affects us because in it we find the blessings of God.

The Lord said through the prophet Malachi,

“Bring the full tithe into the storehouse, so that there may be food in my house;

and thus put me to the test, says the Lord of hosts;

see if I will not open the windows of heaven for you

and pour down for you an overflowing blessing.” (Malachi 3:10)

And from Proverbs 22:9,

“Those who are generous are blessed, for they share their bread with the poor.”

Of course there is no guarantee that if you tithe you will never lose your job,

or never have other bad things happen to you.

Nevertheless, when we give generously, the unmistakable blessings of God flow into our lives.

The question is do we see them for what they are?

Blessings come in all kinds of shapes, sizes and packages…

My brothers and sisters in Christ.

The Bible has so much to say about wisdom and finances,

With over 2,000 verses that tell us to be generous and good stewards of our resources,

We know the Godly teachings about generosity and sacrifice.

Jesus demanded that his followers serve not wealth but God…

And lets us clearly know that life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.

Paul’s challenge for us today is clear as well:

*As for those who in the present age are rich—*

*Command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches,*

*but rather to set their hopes on God,*

*who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment.*

*They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to share,*

*thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future,*

*so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.*

My friends we are so blessed…let us find ways to be defined by generosity.

To take hold of the life that really IS life!

\*\*I would like to draw us into a time of personal reflection now.

In your bulletin is a salmon colored card that asks you to consider making

Personal Goals and Commitments for 2011. Please take it out now.

This card is for your own personal use…

to be placed in your bible at home for reference in the coming year.

It asks us to consider devising a plan that will allow us to experience the true joy…

that comes through simplicity and generosity.

Let us prayerfully consider this Message today of what defines us and the previous weeks’ sermons as we look at this card before us…

Will join with me in a moment of prayer?

Oh God, we thank you that you have given us life, that you sustain us by the power of your Holy Spirit and that you gave Jesus Christ as an offering for us and for our sins. We thank you for the abundance that we have in our lives. And we pray that you would help us.

* Help us, O Lord, to honor you with our tithes.
* Help us to care for the poor and those who are in need.
* Help us to recognize that it is more blessed to give than to receive.

We offer ourselves to you. Guide us now as we prepare to fill out our Personal Goals and Commitment Cards. Help us, O Lord, to do your will. Lead us, we pray. In your Holy name, Amen.

*{play quiet music}*

Please remember that the Personal Goal and Commitment Card is for your own personal use…keep prayerfully considering the goals you’re willing to accomplish for next year.

Our final hymn is on pg 3 of your bulletin: They’ll Know We are Christians By Our Love