

LIFE THAT REALLY IS LIFE

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Psalm 16; 1 Timothy 6:13-21

***“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.”***

1 Timothy 6:18-19

It’s Veterans Day weekend: a time for honoring all those courageous people who’ve put their lives on the line for our country. On social media, the photos have been coming fast and furious for days: old snapshots of parents, grandparents, aunts and uncles who served in World War 2, or Korea, or Vietnam, or some more recent conflict.

This weekend we honor them for their selfless service.

One veteran who received a lot of accolades in recent years was the late Senator John McCain. His story is well-known: a Navy pilot shot down over Vietnam. He served five and a half dreadful years in the primitive POW camp nicknamed the “Hanoi Hilton.”

In the last months of his life, Senator McCain faced a new challenge. He was diagnosed with glioblastoma, an aggressive brain tumor.

Soon after his diagnosis, McCain explained to Lesley Stahl, of TV’s *60*

Minutes, how he reacted when his doctor broke the news that his prognosis was poor: “So I just said, ‘I understand. Now we’re gonna do what we can, get the best doctors we can find and do the best we can. And, at the same time, celebrate with gratitude a life well lived.’”

I don’t know about you, but I can’t think of too many other people, newly diagnosed with terminal cancer, who talk about “celebrating with gratitude.” But that was John McCain. I suppose he learned a long time before, in that prison camp, how essential it is to practice gratitude and to celebrate life — even with the prospect of death looming over all.

Not long after the Senator made his announcement, a woman named Jessica Morris — who has the same brain-tumor diagnosis — wrote an op-ed for the *New York Times*. She concluded that piece with these words:

“I imagine most people feel a surge of pity for Mr. McCain. I do, too. But I also feel something more powerful: solidarity. I wouldn’t wish membership in this club on anyone, Senator, but now that you’re a member, you’ll find the warmest of welcomes.

My life has been changed profoundly by my glioblastoma. Mr. McCain’s life will be, too. But by finding a way to channel the terror of the diagnosis productively, I feel more alive today than ever.”¹

¹<https://www.nytimes.com/2017/07/20/opinion/john-mccain-brain-cancer-glioblastoma.html>

Wow. Just wow. “I feel more alive today than ever,” says the woman with an incurable brain tumor.

What is this miracle called “life,” that can rise up triumphant, in the face of inevitable death? What is this wonder — this super-power, let’s call it what it is — that our Creator has entrusted to us: and that some of us actually figure out how to exercise?

The First Letter to Timothy supplies an answer. It shows up in the closing lines of the letter, which — oddly enough — have to do with generosity:

“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.”

“Take hold of the life that really is life,” says the biblical writer. This advice flies in the face of the way most of us are used to thinking — especially about money. Doesn’t wealth bring life, and poverty lead to death? So says the wisdom of the world...

You know what the gamblers down in Atlantic City say, don’t you, when they’re engaged in a long run at the slot machines? They’ve lost a lot of money,

but they've still got a little bit left: just enough to keep on pushing the buttons.

"I'm still alive," they say, triumphantly — as though their little cupful of tokens were somehow the fount of all life.

They're wrong, of course. So very wrong. Any sort of living measured in units of currency is not "the life that really is life."

As the First Letter to Timothy teaches, it's just the opposite. Those who are "rich in good works, generous, and ready to share" are the ones who are truly alive! The apostle doesn't speak here of the alternative, but if he did, he'd probably have some choice words for the fearful ones who hold tightly to every dollar and never make an extravagant, sacrificial gift to anyone, or anything.

The church of Jesus Christ is especially dependent on givers who understand "the life that really is life." These faithful givers know that completing an estimate of giving card is not an exercise of guilt or fear, but one of risky, extravagant joy!

It's the sort of feeling many of us experience on Christmas morning — the adults, anyway. Most young kids have not yet developed their gift of generosity: but grown-ups know what I'm talking about. On Christmas morning, sitting around opening presents with the family, I do enjoy what other people give me;

but it's a far greater thrill to watch others I love open gifts I've carefully chosen and wrapped just for them — even though any member of my family will testify that I've never mastered the skill of wrapping presents!

As all of us mature in our Christian faith, we discover that filling out an estimate of giving card — and then fulfilling that promise week after week (or month after month) all through the year — is not a chore. It's a joy! It's a joy precisely because giving to others, to the glory of God, *is* a matter of taking hold of the life that really is life.

In the church of Jesus Christ, we need people with all kinds of spiritual gifts. The Holy Spirit sees to that: raising up men and women to fulfill particular tasks. Some of us are good at teaching young children. Others, at cooking a meal or singing in the choir or hosting coffee hour. Some of us have a heart for mission beyond the walls of this church, and give of our time through ministries like Interfaith Hospitality Network or SHIPS or the Board of Deacons.

But this congregation — along with every other church that's ever been — has a need for people whose spiritual gift is generosity. These are people who know the deep truth of the saying, attributed to Winston Churchill, that goes like this: “We make a living by what we get; but we make a life by what we give.”

I'll bet you didn't know that generosity is a spiritual gift. But it says so, right in the Bible. In Romans 12:6-8, Paul writes:

“We have gifts that differ according to the grace given to us: prophecy, in proportion to faith; ministry, in ministering; the teacher, in teaching; the exhorter, in exhortation” — now, here's the one I want you to notice — **the giver, in generosity!”**

Giving is a *spiritual* gift, my friends! We tend to think of it in purely material terms — thinking that money, somehow, is vaguely dirty or unholy — but that's not how Paul sees it. We all have that gift to some degree. But some of us truly do have it more than others.

If, as you sign your check for the Sunday offering, or set up your smartphone or computer for an electronic payment, you ever say to yourself, “I feel so inadequate, just giving money, when other people are doing the real work,” well don't ever think that again! What *you* do, in making generous gifts of money, is of vital importance to Christ's work.

So, think about that — won't you? — as you ponder your gifts to the church in the coming year. Search your heart. Ask yourself what God has gifted you to do — and, more than that, what God is *calling* you to do. If you can step up today, in a spirit of overwhelming joy — akin to watching someone open a present on

Christmas morning — and write an amount on that estimate of giving card that's significantly greater than any amount you've given before, then you just may have that gift of generosity!

Maybe you've never made this kind of commitment. Maybe it seems a little scary to make a promise to God, saying, "This is what I pledge to do for you this year: giving off the top, before I pay any other bills."

Maybe it does seem a little scary to think of giving not a dollar here, a dollar there, but a *percentage* of your income, dedicated to God's work. But that's how Christians are meant to give: systematically, sacrificially, generously. And do you know what's the beautiful thing about giving proportionately — thinking in terms of a percentage, rather than a dollar amount? It truly is "one size fits all." There's no gift too small, in terms of dollars, if — according to the percentage of income on which it's based — it's an act of joyful sacrifice.

For those of you who already calculate your giving proportionately, then the back of today's bulletin offers a rough guide on where to go from here.

Our Lord Jesus Christ needs you. He needs you to explore that spiritual gift of generosity, in supporting the work of this congregation. Oh, what this congregation could accomplish together for him, if more of us discovered and deployed that beautiful, beautiful spiritual gift! What a work Lamington Church

could perform in this community! What a difference we could make in the lives of others, by means of mission, near and far! What life we could offer to others, in Christ's name: life that really is life!

Let us pray.

**Lord, there is no one more generous than you:
offering to us the gift of life itself;
offering the gift of your son to be our Savior.
May we have not only the courage, but also the joy
to commit to your work today
a proportion of the wealth you have given us:
offered up freely, joyously, generously.
And, more than that, in that other currency of our lives —
the minutes and hours of each day —
may we make a similar commitment of time,
living in every way the life that really is life.
In the name of Jesus we ask it. Amen.**

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