

ðA Community of Abundanceö  
 Acts 2: 42 ó 47                      John 10: 1 ó 10  
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 April 13, 2008

The context for this sermon begins with the question: What was Jesus' mission to the world? We could look in several places to find answers to this question. We might look at Jesus' statements about himself to the congregation in Galilee when he quoted the Prophet Isaiah. He said he had come to bring good news to the poor, sight to the blind, release to the captive and to set at liberty the oppressed. In other places he claims to have come to defeat death, to ensure eternal life, and to proclaim God's love and forgiveness. Each of these paints a portion of the picture of our Christ. In today's Gospel reading, we hear another statement of why Jesus has come and, then, in the book of Acts (which contains accounts of the life and development of the early church) we read a description of how the earliest Christians lived in response to their experience of the risen Christ. Jesus says that he has come "that they may have life, and have it abundantly." It seems important to me that we try to discern exactly what the nature of the abundance is that he is offering to humanity.

We might begin by looking at the context for Jesus' promise. He is using the metaphor of the sheep and the shepherd. We don't need to understand much about sheep or shepherds to get the point. Some who appear to be shepherds are actually thieves. They are not interested in the care of the sheep; they only want to enrich themselves. In contrast he refers to himself as the "good shepherd" whose primary concern is for the abundant life of the sheep.

So what is this "abundant life"? I am not willing to oversimplify such a powerful statement by locating abundant life in the hereafter. Jesus is preaching to the poor, the downtrodden, the sick, the outcast, in short, to those who are disenfranchised. How does he propose that there will be any tangible impact on their immediate lives? Much of Christianity has attempted to answer this question with a colossal cop-out. "Pie in the Sky, by and by!" Don't rock the boat now. You'll get your reward in heaven.

Well, how convenient it is for the rich to maintain that attitude. Just keep the masses focused on their heavenly reward and they won't complain about how miserable their lives are in the here and now. There is something highly immoral about such a position, and we must admit that it exists as much today as it did in Jesus' time.

There are two pieces of evidence that combine to challenge the immorality of the economic status quo. The first is Jesus' proclamation from Isaiah of why he came. There is no way to read those words without understanding that he is talking about the transformation of political and economic systems. Good news to the poor, sight to the blind, freedom for the captive, and liberty for the oppressed: these refer to the day-to-day lives of real people. The second piece of evidence is found in our reading from the book of Acts. We find here a description of how the people of the early church actually lived. This reading is not about their expectations for a heavenly reward. It is about how they lived and related in their immediate present.

And all who believed were together and had all things in common; and they sold their possessions and goods and distributed them to all, as any had need. And day-by-day,

attending the temple together and breaking bread in their homes, they partook of food with glad and generous hearts, praising God and having favor with all the people. And the Lord added to their number day-by-day those who were being saved.

I maintain that what they experienced was truly abundant life: the kind Jesus said he had come to make possible for them. We could argue that they became good shepherds for each other, looking out for one another's well being.

One of the reasons that so many Christians don't take this early church experience seriously is that further on in the New Testament there are many statements contradicting Jesus that unfortunately have been used to justify all sorts of human degradation. For example, from 1 Peter 2: 17 ó 20

Honor all men. Love the brotherhood. Fear God. Honor the emperor. Servants, be submissive to your masters with all respect, not only to the kind and gentle but also to the overbearing. For one is approved if, mindful of God, he endures pain while suffering unjustly. For what credit is it, if when you do wrong and are beaten for it you take it patiently? But if when you do right and suffer for it you take it patiently, you have God's approval.

Frankly, I find it difficult to square these words with those words from Jesus about liberty for the oppressed. In order to make sense of the disparity, it is necessary to look to the historical context. Jesus was an original. He provided a new understanding of human values that were based in divine love. Those who gathered into the abundant community did so in the first years after the crucifixion. They took Jesus words to heart and lived them out in every aspect of their lives. Later on, as the church became established, it became more dangerous to live according to counter-culture values. As a result of the changing situation many church leaders taught people to stay in their places. In addition, we must remember that it was more than 300 years later before a group of church leaders were charged with the task (by the Emperor incidentally) to select the gospels and letters that would make up the official biblical texts for Christianity. There were hundreds, if not thousands, of letters and gospels in circulation, available for them to select from, but it is no surprise that having become the state-sanctioned religion, these Christian leaders would have selected texts that were not too challenging towards the political and economic powers of the day. Even though some challenging words found their way into the official selection, these have been largely ignored ever since.

So when we read the Bible, we must make some conscious decisions about the relative centrality of these texts. My choice is to believe Jesus whenever there is a contradiction.

Meanwhile, the pressures of the particular cultural and economic values we live under today are no less compelling than those that faced Jesus, the early church, and even the state sanctioned church 300 to 400 years later. The question that faces us today is how Jesus's vision of the abundant life and the early church's living out of the vision stands as a challenge to those social characteristics that we take for granted. Truthfully, we have all been brainwashed into a narrow view that tells us how life should be lived.

Allow me to illustrate what I mean. I consider myself to be a product of the television generation. I have discovered that this is not good news. (But I haven't been connected to broadcast TV for the last six years.) I remember as a child being virtually bewitched by any TV commercial that said "Be the first on your block to own whatever." The primary message of these ads was that we consumers actually needed all those "gazing pins" (as Vicky Robin and Joe Dominguez call them in *Your Money or Your Life*.) The second even more insidious message was that buyers of these products would be able to establish their superiority by making their purchases before anyone else. Furthermore, we have consistently been taught that our culture's highest practical value is the improvement of our standard of living. That translates into the ability to buy whatever we want no matter what it costs our spiritual lives (to say nothing of our pocketbooks), no matter what it costs the planet, and no matter what the human cost happens to be to those around our world who produce those goods. It can be persuasively argued that we have a high standard of living in this country, and that is generally believed to be a good thing. What is left out of the statement is that our relative wealth comes at the expense of the poor and disenfranchised throughout the world. And we are even hurting ourselves with the resulting pollution.

When Jesus said that he came so they "could have life and have it abundantly," it does not appear that he was favoring the wealthy over the disenfranchised. Also in *Your Money or Your Life*, we find a comparison between success that is measured by standard of living and success that is measured by quality of life. I suggest to you that when Jesus offers abundant life, he is referring to its quality not its buying power or even its eternal longevity. Quality of life is measured by its breadth, its depth, its available choices, and its loving relationships. Quality of life might even include the opportunity for all to experience a broadly flexible emotional life.

So, if abundance is not primarily about buying power, what is it about then? Abundant life has most to do with loving and caring relationships. It includes connection with all that is within us: thoughts, emotions, and creativity for starters. It includes connection with what is beyond us: God, the universe, creation, and all collections of humanity. And abundance includes connection with all that is between us. We find abundance in relationship. In relationship, we find the Kingdom of God moving among and between us. The truth is, we cannot experience abundance as individuals without making other individuals suffer. We can only experience true abundance in community.

As a local church, we must decide who we will be. Will we be a congregation that indulges the individualistic whims and desires of those who come here "for a price, of course"? Or will we be a place that offers real abundance: a community that produces good shepherds who always considering the deepest well being of all the others?

It will take some deep conversation for us to determine how such a community of abundance might operate, so I invite you think in the most concrete terms possible how we, as a church, can be as faithful to the Gospel of Jesus Christ as were those early Christians.