

John 10:1-10

“Very truly, I tell you, anyone who does not enter the sheepfold by the gate but climbs in by another way is a thief and a bandit. 2 The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. 3 The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. 4 When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice. 5 They will not follow a stranger, but they will run from him because they do not know the voice of strangers.” 6 Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them.

7 So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. 8 All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. 9 I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. 10 The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

What is abundant life? Or to put another way, “What is the good life?” When you think about it, many people want us to accept their notion of the good life.

LIVIN’ LA VIDA LOCA

Not too long ago a popular Latin singer sang about “Livin’ la vida loca.” (I think that means something like living the wild life.) When I was younger that might have appealed to me. Now I just don’t have the energy to be wild!

But, “la vida loca” does have its appeal. Many people want to live life filled with pleasure. Some of you may remember an old beer commercial that talked about the fact that we only go around once in life. We have to grab for all the gusto that we can get.

I loved that commercial. There was no hiding what they were selling, pure hedonism. Eat, drink and be merry for tomorrow we die.

Unfortunately, “livin’ la vida loca” takes its toll over time. The pleasures of life can become a cruel taskmaster. The search for even greater gusto can destroy us. Each day there is some new celebrity or politician or even famous minister who is done in by this lifestyle.

The world is filled with organizations that seek to restore the lives of those who have been broken because they drank too much or gambled too much or “whatever” too much.

We love to self-righteously lift up these fallen leaders as examples of what not to do. And yet we live in a world that even as it self-righteously condemns the fallen, also continues to lift up that lifestyle as something to be emulated. There are subtle and not so subtle messages in the media that suggest “la vida loca” is the good life, the abundant life.

Don’t be too quick to say that you’re not tempted by “la vida loca.” More than one person has said to me, “I am not tempted by that” only to fall to that temptation in the not too distant future.

All of us in one way or another can succumb to the temptation to grab for all the gusto we can get right now because in our heart of hearts we do not believe in the future.

“La vida loca” is one of those thieves that Jesus talks about in our lesson for today. “La vida loca” climbs over the fence and attempts to steal the soul of God’s people. Don’t listen to that voice. Run from that voice. This is not the voice of the Good Shepherd.

AN ABUNDANCE OF RICHES

Another vision of the abundant life, a kind of variation on the same theme is the life of riches. This is what the world thinks of when they think of the term abundance.

This past week I ran across some quotes from rich men that expressed this viewpoint. W.C. Fields once said, “A rich man is nothing more than a poor man with money.”

John Paul Getty put it this way, “The meek shall inherit the earth, but not the mineral rights.”

And then there is George Bernard Shaw who wrote, “I am a millionaire. That is my religion.”

Unfortunately, money is the religion of many people. Whether they have money or not, money is at the center of their lives. Money is indeed the God in whom they trust.

PBS did an interesting piece about how advertising had shifted in the past few years. The advertising is not so much about brand quality. Now advertising makes subtle claims about quality of life.

According to this Frontline special this “emotional branding” seeks to fill the empty places that institutions like schools and churches used to fill. In other words, some of us worship at the First Church of Apple Computers! I should know. It’s my second religion!

But, in the long run money and things do not satisfy. There is always the desire for just a little bit more or at least the iPad 3 when it comes out.

The editor of Christianity Today, Philip Yancey interviewed a group of rich and famous people.

These people had everything. They had money. They had fame. And yet he said that to a person these were some of the most miserable people he had ever met in his life.

And yet society envied them and wanted to emulate them.

Abundance does not consist in how much money or how much stuff we have. And those who tell us that money is the answer are thieves. They try to get us to sell our spiritual birthright for a pot of bean soup. They try to climb over the fence of God's love and steal the souls of His people.

The Good Shepherd tells us. Don't listen to that voice. Run from that voice. That is not the voice of truth. That is not the way of abundant life.

IS THAT ALL THERE IS?

There are many other thieves that come disguised as angels of light, purporting to offer us the good life. Politicians, religious hucksters and health gurus all promise us everything. But, in the end they do not deliver.

In the end they leave us asking, "Is that all there is?"

A young minister told of his "is that all there is?" moment. He loved to play video games. In particular he like to play World of Warcraft. But, one day as he sat before his beloved computer he began to feel sick. He had the flu.

And so he turned off the computer and didn't turn it on for five days. As he put it, "I did not log in to the computer game that had dominated my life for almost two years."

And do you know what he did when was finally well enough to stumble over to the computer? He deleted World of Warcraft from the hard drive and threw the disks into the trash.

He wrote, "And in the three years, two months, and two days since contracting the flu bug, I have never logged back into the game. The flu acted as the catalyst for the breaking of my addiction to the computer game.

The illness put me on the disabled list for a week right before Easter; but no matter how awful the flu made me feel, I thank God every day for the not-so-gentle push away from the stagnant life I was living.

I thank God every day for yanking me out of the comfortable sheepfold that I had built up around me. I thank God every day for pulling me kicking and screaming through the gate, away from my dormant life and toward a life full of God.”

Did you hear about the airline pilot who radioed the tower? He said, “Yeah, I’m lost, but I’m making great time!”

Many of us live our lives this way. We go at top speed, but we have no direction. Our lives are fast but not fulfilling. Our lives are full but not abundant.

David Buttrick put it well. He wrote, “... our lives are as brief as the hyphen between the dates on a gravestone.” And it is not how long we live but how well we live that makes the difference.

CHALLENGING FALSE RELIGION

Today’s lesson from Scripture is a direct challenge to those who promise too much and deliver too little. In particular Jesus was challenging the religious leaders of his day. They emphasized following religious rules over compassion.

In the passage that precedes our lesson for today Jesus heals a blind man on the Sabbath. The religious leaders don’t care about the fact that a blind man has been healed. Their only concern is that their rules about not working on the Sabbath have been broken. (John 9:1-41)

Note this. Not only does the world give us a false image of the good life. Sometimes religion gives us a false image of the good life as well.

All religions, including some that purport to be Christian can become so bound by rules and regulations that they miss the most important thing. The heart of compassion is often lost in a sea of religious red tape.

Now as one of the ones who are officially charged with interpreting the sea of religious red tape in the Presbyterian Church, this passage makes me very nervous. And it made those religious leaders of old very nervous.

Jesus said, “For judgment I have come into this world, so that the blind will see and those who see will become blind.” And the religious leaders say, “You’re not talking about us are you?” And Jesus in essence replies, “Bingo.”

In fact Jesus took it a step further. He said that they were not only blind; they were also thieves. They were the ones in our parable today who were trying to enter the sheep pen by another way. They were leading God’s people astray. They were coming to kill and destroy the people that God loved.

They were trying to steal the sheep of God's pasture. And the Great Shepherd of the Sheep was not happy.

It's ironic. Our passage for today is often used to present Jesus as meek and mild, the tender shepherd who cares for his sheep.

One of my earliest memories was a picture we had in the Sunday school room. You know the one. Jesus had this cute little lamb in his arms.

And we got the message. Jesus is the Good Shepherd who wants to cuddle us and make us safe.

But, there's more to the story.

If we really look at this passage, Jesus is not being meek and mild. He is being confrontational.

Jesus is once again taking on the powers that be. There is fire in the eyes of this heavenly shepherd; he is he defending his flock.

He is laying down his life for the flock. He is determined to keep the thieves and bandits from taking the soul of his people.

Jesus does not want his people to settle for less than the abundant life, a life that is filled to overflowing with the grace and goodness of God.

ABUNDANT LIFE DEFINED

So what is this good life, this abundant life that God wants to give his people? It is revealed in the words and actions of Jesus.

In the gospel of John we learn that Jesus is the way, the truth and the life. No one comes to God except through him.

Jesus is the gate that leads to the kingdom. Jesus has the words of eternal life.

If you want abundant life, you have to come through Jesus.

Now what does that mean? It means something different from what we might suspect.

The word translated "life" in John's gospel is a key word that is used some 25 times. Life is at the beginning and the end of John's concerns. It is the first and the last thing that he writes about.

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John tells us in the very beginning of his gospel that Jesus is the Word of God. Jesus is the source of all life in the universe. The ultimate purpose of John's gospel is that people believe in Christ and have "life in his name." (John 20:31)

For John, life in Christ means living in fellowship with Him and the Father who sent him. This means having hope for the life to come (eternal life) and a truly full and fulfilled life here and now (abundant life).

This has profound ethical implications. In other words how we live should reflect the teachings and the life of the Great Shepherd. If we are the sheep of His pasture we need to hear and heed his voice.

Our connection with Jesus, the Word of God made flesh is to be complete. We must learn to love the things that he loved and to despise the things that he loathed.

Life lived in the Spirit of the risen Christ cannot be selfish, self-centered or guarded. On the contrary life in Christ is abundant.

CONTENT IN ALL CIRCUMSTANCES

The word translated abundant is also a rich word. It is the kind of abundance that comes from tempered desires. It is freedom from envy.

Abundant life is so caught up in relationship with Christ that we are freed from want. We deem our present life to be sufficient and satisfying.

Do you remember Terry Anderson? He was taken captive by terrorists and held for a long time.

Erma Bombeck, the humorist wrote a more serious piece about him when he finally came home. She wrote,

"You cannot get a refund or credit on the days of your life. Once you have lived them, they're gone..."

What I was struck by was Terry Anderson's determination to live each day—one hour at a time. Every day isn't the day you win the Pulitzer, ...win the lottery and lose three pounds. Some days you take what you can get and make the most of it.

Terry Anderson had a run of bad days—2,455 of them. He decided to play the hand he was dealt. He did it with faith, anger, humor and a lot of help from his friends."

Abundant life does not depend upon what happens on the outside. Abundant life depends upon what happens on the inside.

It reminds me of something the Apostle Paul once said. He thanked the church at Philippi for their offer to help him. But, he also noted that despite his current predicament (he was in jail) he had learned how to be “content” in all circumstances.

Sometimes Paul had a lot and sometimes he had nothing at all but his satisfaction did not depend upon what he had or didn’t have.

His satisfaction didn’t depend upon whether he was a captive or whether he was free.

His satisfaction rested on his relationship with Jesus. (Philippians 4:10-14)

That’s what we mean when we talk about abundant life. It is a life filled with hope. To quote the words of our anthem from a few weeks ago, I’ve Got Joy, “that joy is not dependent upon what we do or say.”

Abundant life does not guarantee perpetual health or constant comfort. Abundant life is simply walking with and trusting in Jesus ... in good times and in bad.

ABUNDANT IN MERCY

And abundant life can mean voluntarily doing without for the sake of the kingdom.

For example, in a few weeks we will read about the life of the early church. Those first Christians had an abundant life. They shared meals and the scripture with each other on a daily basis. They truly loved one another.

But, they also learned to make do with what they had in a difficult time.

Some of the more wealthy members sold their excess goods in order to meet the needs of the poor. They put a limit on how much they acquired for themselves so that they could be abundant in their mercy to others. (Acts 2:45-47)

And it was this abundance of mercy that made the early church so attractive to the rest of the world. The church grew by leaps and bounds in those early days because they lived an abundant life. They lived a life that was filled with mercy and grace.

I am truly dismayed by those who have reduced the gospel to pious platitudes and the promise of riches. Those who preach the prosperity “gospel” are truly leading people astray with false promises. They are stealing hope and replacing it with a false hope.

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When it comes to abundant life, I like what C.S. Lewis wrote in his classic statement of the Christian faith, *Mere Christianity*. Lewis wrote,

“In religion ... comfort is the one thing you cannot get by looking for it. If you look for truth, you may find comfort in the end. If you look for comfort you will not get either comfort or truth—only soft soap and wishful thinking to begin with and, in the end, despair.”

Today Jesus bids us to follow him. Let’s hear his voice and his voice only that we might have abundant life.

Amen.