

“That You May Have Life”

April 13, 2008

John 10:1-10

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If you were here last Sunday, you might remember that Don Alexander’s sermon title was “If I Had Just One Sermon Left to Preach . . .” We preacher types probably think about that quite a bit. I know there is probably hardly ever a sermon I work on that I don’t think somewhere during that process, “If this were the last sermon that I were to preach, would it be all right?”

The scripture for today would be one that I would be comfortable with choosing as my last sermon. It’s not a “greatest hits” scripture. If we were to pass out ballots today, I doubt if anyone here, before we heard the scripture today, would have put down John 10:1-10 as your favorite scripture, but there is Good News in the scripture that we need to hear—important news for the living of our faith.

The story starts out innocently enough. It is a continuation of the story of the man born blind in Chapter 9. Remember, we discussed that a few weeks ago. Do you remember what happened after the blind man was healed? He was cast out of the Temple. With this in mind, then, Jesus talks about thieves, bandits, and strangers. Then there is this beloved portrait of Jesus as the shepherd. There is another portrait of Jesus as the gate, something we need to hear in the church today. We don’t do this in our tradition, but you have heard in other traditions of church members being excommunicated from the church. In the Amish tradition sometimes people are sometimes shunned by other members in the community. When Jesus says he is the gate, it seems to me to be a warning to the church. It is not our business to exclude others. Jesus is the gate. That’s not our business.

Finally, there is one more beloved picture of Jesus. Jesus says “The sheep hear my voice and know my voice.” At Bible study we talked about when two or three shepherds would come to a watering hole at the same time and one shepherd was ready to leave that shepherd would call out to his sheep and they would follow him because they knew his voice. You remember the words of the beloved hymn: “He speaks and the sound of his voice is so sweet that even the birds hush their singing.” You remember on that first Easter morning in the garden—Mary did not recognize Jesus as the risen Christ until he spoke to her. It was then that she recognized him because she recognized his voice.

The voice of the living Christ says to us today, “I came that you might have life and have it abundantly.” Abundant life. “I came that you might have life and have it abundantly.” We believe in a God of abundance. Just look around this time of year and see the beauty all around us. Suzanne and I were in the car within the past couple of weeks, and as we were driving, I noticed that she was looking at some of

the trees. She said, "You know, God did a good thing when he made Redbud trees." God didn't stop with just Redbud trees; Dogwood, Bradford Pears, all kinds of flowering trees, bushes, and flowers. We believe in a God of abundance—a God who blesses us abundantly.

Not everyone feels this way about life. Our young people and the young people from El Reno will recognize this. Sometimes you see it on a bumper sticker on the back of a car. The bumper sticker says, "Life's a bleep, then you die." How sad that is. But that's how some of our best and brightest young people feel about life. "Life is a son-of-a-gun, and then you die." That's all there is to it. Truth be known, the Apostle Paul might have had one of those bumper stickers on the back of his chariot. Do you remember in the 8th Chapter of Romans where he listed things that might cause us to feel separated from God? We would expect to see death on that list, but he includes life on the list also. Yet Christ says, "I came that you might have life and have it abundantly." Sometimes, instead of choosing life, we instead choose to make people feel that they wish they were dead.

We were in a restaurant the other day. There was a couple sitting in the booth behind Suzanne. I was facing them. I could not hear what they were saying. They were giving their order to the waitress. When the waitress left, Suzanne leaned over to me and said, "Did you hear what she said?" The woman was sitting in the next booth to Suzanne with her back to Suzanne, so Suzanne was able to hear. She gave her order to the waitress and evidently the husband waited a little too long so the wife said, "Let's get on with it. Give her your order. Get a move on." Now, if I had been sitting with her, I might have been tempted to get the pepper shaker and say, "Lady, move this up your nose!"

We do things that make people wish they were dead. Have you seen the video of what those teen-age girls did to the other teenage girl who was supposedly their friend? I can hardly stand to watch the video. The violence in that video! We hear and read the news stories of the polygamist sect in Texas. This is a religious group who is bringing a form of death, not life.

In a time of war, there will always be those who speak eloquently and urgently for death. In the church, we are called to do better. There is a Jesuit Priest by the name of Walter Burghardt. In preparation of this sermon, I came across something that Burghardt wrote that I think you will appreciate.

"Despite understandable disagreements on life-and-death issues, for example, the rights of the unborn and the dignity of the age-worn, the morality of war and capital punishment — on one conviction no conflict ought sever us. If life is to be taken at all, it must be taken with reluctance, with a stifled cry of pain, with a horrifying realization that not another cipher but someone unrepeatable is being destroyed, that with his or her death I myself is somehow diminished—and God is not glorified."

Last Sunday, Don Alexander quoted D.T. Niles, the old evangelist. D.T. Niles said, "The glory of God is a human being fully alive." Hundreds of years before D.T. Niles said that, one of the early church fathers, Irenaeus said those words. D.T. Niles was quoting Irenaeus. "The glory of God is a human being fully alive." "I came that you might have life and have it abundantly."

The living Christ would say to us, "Embrace life as a grace gift. Burghardt says this:

"There is a mystery about grace—not some thing but persons in love. On God's side, grace is God offering himself to us, communicating his life to us, demanding from us love and fidelity. On our side, grace is us offering ourselves to God, transformed, shaped to Christ. This life in Christ is not easy to grasp. It may well be that you understand it only by living it."

"I came that you might have life and have it abundantly." This is not a gospel of success, but it is a gospel of abundance. So often we choose scarcity instead of abundance. I have made a list of what I call principles of scarcity and abundance. Here are examples:

Scarcity: There's never enough.

Abundance: There's always enough.

Scarcity: It's all about me.

Abundance: It's mainly about others.

Scarcity: What will I get out of it?

Abundance: How can I help?

Scarcity: What's most important is the value of your possessions.

Abundance: What's most important is a good set of values.

Scarcity: Primary purpose in life is acquiring more assets.

Abundance: Primary purpose is getting off your "assets" to share.

Scarcity: Greatness is measured by the size of your checking account.

Abundance: Greatness is measured by the size of your heart.

Scarcity: How can we keep them out?

Abundance: How can we make them feel welcome?

Scarcity: Holding grudges, nurturing hurt feelings, getting even.

Abundance: Reconciling, healing, forgiving.

Scarcity: All decisions are based on doubt, uncertainty and fear.

Abundance: All of life is lived with hope and confidence and courage.

Scarcity: I thank God I'm not like other men.

Abundance: God, be merciful to me, a sinner.

It is perhaps the saddest thing in the life of the church that we operate more often on the principle of scarcity rather than abundance. If you have ever sat in a

group that constructed a church budget, you've probably seen that happen. What most often happens is, we get the figures from last year and say, "Well, we went over a little bit here. Maybe we need to add something in this area. But if we were under budget in an area, maybe we need to cut back a little. It's called "Just getting by." That's how we plan things in the church. Not the gospel of abundance, but the gospel of "just getting by."

You know what? We do that in other areas of our lives. How often in our marriages do we settle for just getting by? What are you offering to your spouse in the way of abundance? In our families, in our work—it's enough. Do just enough—the minimum—just to get by.

Jesus says, "I came that you might have life and have it abundantly." Earlier I said that God is a god of abundance. The Good News of this gospel is that we have been created in God's image. God has given us a bank account and in the account there is faith, hope, and love and the more of these things we share, the more we receive.

Some of you, a week ago Monday evening, probably watched the national championship game between Memphis and Kansas. (I apologize again for this analogy from the world of basketball. I'm waiting for a Martha Stewart special and I promise I'll watch it and share some kind of story about how to fix dinner for 50 of your closest prisoner friends!) If you watched that game, you remember that at the end of that game Memphis couldn't make a free throw to save their lives. When the game was on the line, they made one out of five free throws. I'm telling you right now, I could go out and make one out of five free throws, but the only team I could play for is the AARP Team. It's a free throw—it's a free shot. No one is guarding you. Anyone can make that.

God has given us a free shot at life. We don't even have to make the shot. All we have to do is to have faith to try to take the shot—to believe more in the principle of abundance than we believe in the principle of scarcity.

If you would, bow your heads now and hear this prayer about abundance:

"Oh Lord, who has taught us that to gain a whole world and lose our souls is great folly, grant us the grace so to lose ourselves that we may truly find ourselves anew in the life of grace, and so to forget ourselves that we may be remembered in your kingdom. Amen." — Reinhold Niebuhr