

Sermon by Rev. Dr. Michael J. Hoyt
Fourth Presbyterian Church
4th Sunday of Easter
May 7, 2017

Life Abundantly

Psalms 23; John 10:1-10; Acts 2:42-47

You can see them standing in the rain for days
waiting in line for the newest, coolest tech gadgets to be released.

Merriam-Webster has added a new word into the dictionary
to define folks like this:

Sheeple: people who are docile, compliant, or easily influenced.

The example sentence:

*Apple has debuted a battery case for the juice-sucking iPhone -
an ungainly, lumpy case
the Sheeple will happily shell out \$99 for.¹*

Unfortunately, it's a word that works to describe us more often than we would like to admit.
And while most of us would rather avoid this label for ourselves,
we are nonetheless strangely warmed by this image of Jesus
as **the Good Shepherd of the sheep.**

Today is Good Shepherd Sunday in the lectionary,
which shows up every year during the Easter season,
and is, perhaps, a fitting image for us
on the Sunday that we gather outside on our little piece of green pasture
for the Spring Picnic!

In John chapter 10,
Jesus contrasts his care for his followers with the treachery of thieves and bandits,
who do not enter the sheepfold by the gate
but climb over the wall intending to kill and destroy.

But, says Jesus,

*The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep.
The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice.
He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out.*

He leads them to the wide open green pastures where they may safely graze,
and he leads them beside still waters where they may find themselves refreshed.
*I came that they may have life, Jesus says,
and have it abundantly.*

But what exactly is this abundant life Jesus came to give?

In answering this question,
the context is important:
Jesus' Good Shepherd discourse in John 10
actually continues the miracle story of John 9,
in which Jesus has given sight to a man who was born blind
which we read during Lent.
You'll remember that Jesus healed the man on the sabbath,
and has incurred the wrath of the Pharisees.
Jesus hasn't gone anywhere else in John 10, but is talking to the same people:
the man who has received his sight,
the Pharisees who are opposing Jesus,
and presumably also the disciples.

So this metaphor of Jesus as the Good Shepherd giving abundant life to the sheep
is Jesus' own interpretation of his healing act.

**Not only has this man regained his physical sight,
which is remarkable enough in itself,
but something more has happened for him.**

The healing of the man born blind is one of 7 signs Jesus performs in John,
all of which are remarkable.
He has turned water into wine,
healed another man who had been ill for 38 years, also on the sabbath,
multiplied the loaves and fishes to feed the 5,000
(whom, we should note, Jesus instructed to sit down in the green grass),
and soon he will call Lazarus out of the tomb.

But these signs are about something more than the remarkable sign itself.
Here in John 10, Jesus interprets all of these signs, saying
*I came that they may have life,
and have it abundantly.*

Even when Jesus raises Lazarus from the dead,
he says not just, *I am the resurrection,*
but *I am the resurrection AND the life.*

**The point is not just about resuscitating a dead body,
or about the crowd eating their fill of bread,
or about physical sight,
but about the life — and the quality of life — that follows.**

So how do we measure quality of life these days?
What sort of life would we consider to be abundant life?

Today, perhaps, we may think that abundant life has to do with money,
which gives us the ability to afford comfort, and even luxury.

Or to afford experiences like travel.

Abundant life is about making great memories with those we love.

Don't we generally assumed that a family that can take a vacation together to Europe
is living more abundantly than a family who is together,
but living in a shelter under a bridge?

Abundance has to do with having the financial means
to choose the kind of life you want to live.

So people who can afford to sip on expensive drinks

while gazing out at the city from a rooftop restaurant

are considered to be living more abundantly

than those who gather and drink iced tea at the local shelter
just down the street.

Both groups are sharing a meal in the company of others.

But one is considered to be living more abundantly than the other,
because they have been able to pay for the higher vantage point,
while those in the lower position are eating donated food.

Of course, those eating the donated food at the shelter
might be feeling greatly blessed to be there

and not to be hungry

and bedding down in a cardboard box in the woods.

It is, of course, important that the homeless shelter is not visible from the rooftop,
and vice versa, in order to sustain whatever sense of abundance

each may be experiencing —

for if the wealthy are thinking too much about the poor,

or if the poor are thinking too much about the wealthy,

that awareness might put a damper on the experience of abundance
each is feeling.

But are they both living an abundant life,

according to Jesus definition?

It might be an interesting conversation to have with them.

Today, we will share a meal, you and I, at the picnic,

some of which we have provided ourselves (if we brought a dish),

and some of which has been shared with us by others.

And we will eat together not in a finely appointed room,

but while sitting on plastic chairs, or on blankets on the ground.

What is it about this experience today that will feel like abundance?

Does it have to do with having so much food available to us?

Does it have to do with our belonging to the community that is gathered here?

Does it have to do with our relationships with one another?

Does it have to do with the fact that before we sit down out there
we have sat together in here at this table?

In biblical days, before money was quite as much of a thing as it is today,
abundant life was symbolized by a feast.

Throughout the Old Testament

an abundant table, with rich foods and well-aged wines,
plentiful bread — this was the sign of abundant living;
or as the Hebrews longed for,
a land flowing with milk and honey.

That is,

pastures that were lush and green enough to feed milk-producing livestock,
and flora sufficient to allow bees to make honey.

For the Psalmist in Psalm 23,

the table prepared before him by the Lord
has even more meaning because its abundance was enjoyed
strangely enough,
in the presence of my enemies.

In other words, for the Psalmist,

if he had suffered any shame over which his enemies may have gloated,
he is now vindicated and affirmed as being of great value
by his inclusion at the Lord's table
which his enemies can clearly see.

You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies.

You anoint my head with oil. My cup overflows.

So the Psalmist concludes:

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I will dwell in the house of the Lord forever.*

How do you experience God's goodness and mercy?

And what do goodness and mercy have to do with your feeling of abundance?

These are questions worth pondering — consciously pondering, I mean,
because we are all pondering them unconsciously all the time.

Just below the level of awareness,

we rate ourselves and our lives in comparison with the lives of others.

We ponder our sense of belonging

in comparison with the belonging we perceive others to enjoy.

Last Sunday, I spoke to our youth about how cliques

are destructive of a sense of community in a youth group,

but of course it is not just our youth who experience cliques.

We all seek belonging,

and we all feel the pain of being excluded.

So given our various access to bread, to feast, to community, to friends,

given our various levels of control over life,

what is this abundant life Jesus offers?

And who are these thieves and bandits who would steal it away?

What impostors, what substitutes, sneak into our lives

and deceive us into following them instead of our Good Shepherd?

Whatever abundant life may be,
it can only be found in relationship with our living Lord,
and somehow with the others who also belong to his fold.

This finally brings us to the reading from Acts,
where we are given a picture of the early church sharing together
in the abundant life that Jesus came to give.
A picture of the early church community
living together, gathered around the teachings of Jesus,
and enjoying fellowship in the Spirit of Jesus,
sitting at table with one another.

We are told that they found their fulfillment
not in buying and accumulating possessions,
but in selling them and sharing the proceeds.
And this image teases us once more into asking,
What is this abundant life Jesus came that we might have?
And how are our money and possessions related to it?

Now I don't for a minute think that any of us are going to walk out of here
and sell all our possessions in search of this abundance,
but this picture of the early church ought to give us pause
to think about what we are pursuing in life,
and how we are pursuing it.

*Day by day, as they spent much time together in the temple,
they broke bread at home
and ate their food with glad and generous hearts,
praising God
and having the goodwill of all the people.*

I don't claim to have the answers to these questions about abundant life.
Other than to quote to you the old song which has become cliché,
"Jesus ***is*** the answer for the world today."

This is, indeed, what Jesus says to us in John.
And this answer is one that can be known only by living it,
only by trusting the one who gives this answer,
trusting him to be our Good Shepherd,
and by drawing together, shoulder to shoulder,
as the sheep of his fold,
listening to his voice.

We really are **Sheeple**, like it or not.
And we will follow someone.
And we will belong somewhere.
This is human nature.

Will it be the voice of the Good Shepherd we follow?
Will it be to his fold that we belong?
Will we safely graze upon his green pastures?
Will we dwell in the house of the Lord forever?

In invite you to seek and to find the answers to these questions
in the One who has prepared this table for us
today.

¹ Rachel Martin, Heard on NPR's "Morning Edition," May 1, 2017.