

Wesley United Methodist Church

April 26, 2015

"Abundant Life!"

John 10:1-18, 1 Peter 2:13-17, 21-15,

The college faculty gathered for their weekly meeting/ A professor of archeology brought with him a lamp recently unearthed in the Middle East. It was reported to contain a genie, who, when the lamp was rubbed would appear and grant one wish.

A professor of philosophy was particular intrigued. He grabbed the lamp and rubbed it vigorously. Suddenly a genie appeared and made him an offer. He could choose one of three rewards: wealth, wisdom, or beauty. Without hesitating, the philosophy professor selected wisdom. "Done!" said the genie and disappeared in a cloud of smoke.

All the faculty members turned toward the professor, who sat surrounded by a halo of light. At length, one of his colleagues whispered, "Say something. What wise insight do you now have?" The professor, much wiser now, sighs and says, "I should have taken the money."

Our Scripture readings for today contain one of the best-known sayings of Jesus. It is well known, but often sadly misunderstood. This saying is the second half of John 10:10 and is best known in its King James translation. Jesus says, "I have come that they may have life, and have it more abundantly."

This is the favorite verse of Scripture for many modern Christians, for they read it as an endorsement of their extravagant lifestyle. They equate the abundant life to living in the lap of luxury. They listen enthusiastically to the pitch of the TV evangelist living in his multi-million dollar home who declares, "God wants His people to have nice things!" Certainly the TV evangelist lives up to his creed. Many of them live opulent lifestyles.

I'm not going to be hypocritical. I like nice things. My guess is that you like nice things. All God's children like nice things. Does that mean, therefore, that we can use this verse from John's gospel to baptize rampant materialism? No, it does not.

In our culture we are apt to confuse the "abundant life" that Jesus taught with what is often referred to in our culture as the "good life." The good life consists of things. The accumulation of toys. Someone once saw an epitaph on a tomb that read like this: "She died of things." The next tomb said, "He died providing things for her."

Did you know that there are more malls than high schools in America today? In a recent year, more people filed for bankruptcy than enrolled in college. Our credo today is, "Shop 'til you drop!" Americans, on the average, spend six hours shopping each week, and 40 minutes playing with their children. We have defined ourselves by what we have and what we use, not by who we are and the kind of people we might become.

Comedian George Carlin once said, "That's all your house is--a place to keep your stuff. If you didn't have so much stuff, you wouldn't need a house. You could just walk around all the time. A house is just a pile of stuff with a cover on it, and when you leave your house, you've got to lock it up. You wouldn't want somebody to come by and take your stuff. That's what your house is--a place to keep your stuff while you go out and get more stuff. Sometimes you got to move--got to get a bigger house. Why? No room for your stuff anymore."

Friends, don't confuse the good life with the abundant life that Christ promised. There is nothing wrong with having lots of stuff. But it can't ultimately satisfy your deepest needs. Only the abundant life can do that. So often this phrase is taken out of context to justify a materialistic lifestyle. Our Scriptures for the day tell us how to have the abundant life. And, by the way, compare us with sheep. In Psalm 23, "The Lord is our shepherd..." In 1 Peter we are like sheep going astray. In John's gospel, we are sheep herded into a pen for the night. Being compared to sheep isn't very complimentary, but it is probably a good description of the human condition. The point is, of course, that we have a Shepherd--One who looks after us and protects us. And there are some powerful insights about abundant living.

The person who has abundant life recognizes Jesus' voice. John writes, "The man who enters by the gate is the shepherd of his sheep. The watchman opens the gate for him, and sheep listen to his voice. He calls his

own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and his sheep follow him because they know his voice." The key to abundant life is not the accumulation of things. The key to abundant life is to recognize the voice of Jesus in your life. It is to know you are walking in his light. It is to live as Christ would have you live.

The person who has abundant life also seeks to follow in Christ's steps. What does it mean to follow in Christ's steps? The writer of 1 Peter tells us, "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth." That a pretty high standard. "He committed no sin..." What does that mean? So many people have such a narrow definition of sin. Listen to the words again, "He committed no sin, and no deceit was found in his mouth. When they hurled their insults at him, he did not retaliate; when he suffered, he made no threats. Instead, he entrusted himself to him who judges justly."

We think of sin as some personal transgression. However, it is clear that sin has a relational dimension as well. We show love for Christ by how we treat each other. Not only by how we treat those closest to us, but by how we treat all people, those we like and those we dislike; those of whom we approve and those of whom we do not; the neighbor and the complete stranger.

One day a man stopped in a convenience store to get a newspaper. He noticed that the owner of the store had tears in his eyes and kept looking out the window. He asked what was going on.

The store owner said, "Do you see that bus bench over there? There's a woman who comes there every day around this time. She sits there for about an hour, knitting and waiting. Busses come and go, but she never gets on one and on one ever gets off for her to meet. The other day, I carried her a cup of coffee and sat with her for a while.

"Her only son lives a long way away. She last saw him two years ago, when he boarded one of the busses right there. He's married now, and she has never seen her daughter-in-law or seen their new child. She told me, 'It helps to come here and wait. I pray for them as I knit little things for the baby, and I imagine them in their tiny apartment, saving money to come home. I can't wait to see them.'"

The reason the owner was looking out the window at that particular moment was that the three of them--the son, his wife and their small child--were just getting off the bus. The look on the woman's face when this small family fell into her arms was one of pure joy. And this joy only increased when she looked into the face of her grandchild for the first time. The store owner commented, "I'll never forget that look as long as I live."

The next day that same man returned to the convenience store. The owner was again behind the counter. Before the store owner could say or do anything, the customer said, "You sent her son the money for the bus tickets, didn't you?" The store owner looked back with eyes full of love and a smile and replied, "Yes, I sent the money." Then he repeated his statement from the day before, "I'll never forget that look as long as I live." This man had discovered a measure of the abundant life.

Following the footsteps of Jesus means living for others. The more selfishly we live our lives, the less satisfaction we feel about our lives. The more we are open to others, the better we feel about ourselves. The person who lives life abundantly hears Christ's voice and walks in Christ's footsteps, performing acts of love as Christ performed acts of love.

But there's one more thing to say about abundant life. The person who has abundant life gracefully accepts what Christ has done for him. Abundant living is more than simply being a do-gooder. Abundant living is life lived out of gratitude for what Christ has done for us. Abundant living is not something we are able to do on our own. Abundant living is a gift, a gift of grace. Listen again to the words of Peter: "He himself bore our sins in his body on the tree, so that we might die to sin and live for righteousness; by his wounds you have been healed." Then he adds these words, "For you were like sheep going astray, but now you have returned to the Shepherd and Overseer of your souls."

I hope we understand that there is more than just the good life. There is the abundant life--we hear Christ's voice and we walk in Christ's steps. Amen.