

“An Abundant Life”  
John 10:1-10  
May 15, 2011  
Pastor Tom Williams

Live life abundantly – that might be the tag line from an automobile commercial or an advertisement for some new resort but instead it’s the ending of our reading for today. Now it does read that John’s Jesus says “I came that they might have life and have it abundantly”, however I think its intent is for us to interpret it that we should, in faith, live life abundantly.

Written to and about a community which was separating itself, as a result of its faith in Jesus as Christ, from much that it knew and probably still loved, John is seeking to convince both new believers and the ongoing Christian community that their/its faith is the way to go (pun intended). And in providing its arguments, John, as the other gospels, seeks to link this new faith with the faith of the ancestors of the community. Here we see/hear the obvious link is to the traditional parables of the Torah or Old Testament which offered a vision of God as the good shepherd. And reaching back to a reading from the 27<sup>th</sup> Chapter of Numbers, John also envisions this good shepherd, Jesus, as leading the people, the sheep both out of the fold and then back in to it. It is an image used to describe the one who will lead the people to peace and prosperity as well as assure justice. John links Jesus to this tradition and thus assures the hearer/reader that to believe in Jesus as Christ is simply to continue on the path foretold by the new believers’ former faith community.

It is not too surprising to find in the Gospels references to such imagery as the good shepherd or the one who leads the community as a shepherd in and out of the safety and nurture of the fold. The idea of the good shepherd as the door or gate may be a symbolic linking of the Christ to the means of both entering a safe place and assuring that places safety as a door or gate does for our homes or yards but it also symbolizes the notion that this Savior opens the way into the world and into the joy, hope, and promise offered there. Doors or gates don’t just keep sheep in a pasture they also give them a way out and the doors of our homes don’t just offer a means of ingress but also egress. We enter our homes usually through a door but we also exit them. Perhaps the writer of John is here reminding the hearer/reader that Jesus presence and promise is a presence and promise which doesn’t just protect or offer a protected space but also calls one into the world to live out one’s faith. It is not to a sanctuary that we are called but out of that sanctuary.

Now link that symbol with the notion of living an abundant life and we have the makings of a foundational theological understanding for life in the world. To the first century reader/hearer of this pericope an abundant life would not have been one with much personal wealth nor even necessarily one of safety and ease. It was more likely that John is seeking to remind his community or readers/hearers that the promise of faith in Jesus as Christ is of a life lived in a community where one is appreciated and not rejected, has the opportunity to make an economic contribution and not ostracized. An abundant life

would also be one without the religious, economic, and political exploitation of the Romans. The abundance of such a life would mean a community of safety, joy, freedom, and sharing of a life style to include a religious commonality. We need remind ourselves that this was a community who had broken with their past and that break put them into a situation of rejection by their former community which included economic, religious and probably familial relationships. Add to that the Romans and their exploitation of the area and we have a community to whom the promise of abundant life held much hope if it offered a means of overcoming the various exploitative situations they faced. Remember the promise which John offered was that Jesus had been among the community, performed acts of miraculous natures, been executed by the Romans, and not been held by the power of death. It was this which offered the hope for if not even the power of death could keep the messiah from them what had they to fear and thus the abundance of life was available. The miraculous events of John's Gospel, the signs, are those which point to the abundant life and only the first one deals with what we might consider proof (pardon the pun) the abundant life (turning water into wine). The abundant life is a life lived in a community where there is enough food, people see each other, and all other aspects of life are fulfilling.

Now what does that mean for us? Well let's think about living life abundantly. It doesn't mean a life of leisure and a boatload of things. I think we all know that despite our willingness and irresolute life styles in which we all collect way to many things, meaning and abundance doesn't come from them. As a community of believers, we ought recognize that meaning and joy are not founded or maintained by things. It is life in a community of relationships and conversation where we are allowed, no encouraged to struggle with meaning, to share in seeking justice, and bedeviled by the need to share with others the joy, hope and meaning we draw from this community. If there are things I fear for our denomination and this congregation it isn't that those who are here now won't celebrate this sharing, this struggle, this bedevilment. Let me end my ministry here with these three thoughts drawn and what I believe is a life lived abundantly.

First, share the struggle for justice. And that struggle isn't just about equal rights or other recognized political efforts. The struggle for justice is the struggle to assure that we live lives of abundance in which our abilities and capabilities are utilized. That means, to me, that science is recognized and utilized as the basis of our lives in community. I fear too many times we are timid in our challenge to those who would deny the God given power of ideas and those who would ignore that it is God who participates with us as we seek to better understand our world through our intellect. God doesn't call us to be a creature of the pre-enlightenment world. God calls us live in history and that history includes utilizing our ability to discover how life evolved, what causes many diseases and how they can be cured. The justice for which we are called to struggle is a justice which celebrates each human as a participant with God and each human as having an intellect different from all others but that intellect isn't to be denied its ability to stretch and create. Yes, we must dare to examine and consider how such fits into the fabric of our life together but the ethical discussions founded in a theological understanding shouldn't begin with a large no. Such examination and discussions ought begin with openness to the novelty and possibilities which the scientific intellect makes possible.

Second, continue to struggle to find meaning in life. If this congregation does nothing else it should continue its journey to discover what does it mean to be a community of believers in Madison Wisconsin in 2011. Again, our faith throws us into history because life lived abundantly is not life lived in this sanctuary. Life lived abundantly is life which is lived beyond the walls of this building. It is life lived as a journey of faith in which that faith is living and active and which celebrates the joy, hope, pleasure and peace which God's participation offers us. There is meaning in life but it is meaning which enables us to live and not to fear the danger, the violence, the hatred, the love, the peace which living in this world entails.

And lastly, be bedeviled with growing this community. I confess my guilt in not knowing how or even being sure of the what but we are a liberal Protestant Denomination whose faith is alive and reformed and ever reforming and we need celebrate that. BUT we need also share it with the world for that faith is important to each of us, I hope. We have too often and too easily left the field of evangelism to others and been almost embarrassed, I fear, to try to explain our faith. We need to recognize and celebrate the opportunity to say to the world "this is a place which enables me to live a life of joy, hope, meaning, and peace." AND invite others to join us. If there is anything worthwhile here, we should share it. A life lived abundantly is a life shared with our communities which include our families, our neighborhoods, our work places. We ought bother, pester, and bedevil each other regarding what it is we find worthwhile here and how we can share that. To celebrate God's presence and participation with us is to seek to live life abundantly and to participate fully in the world.

Let me close with a thank you. I have truly enjoyed my time here and all its interesting events! Thank you for your willingness to allow me to participate with you in this part of your communal journey. I have been privileged to learn and to grow in faith in the past year because of that and am especially grateful for this opportunity. May we all continue our journey as we seek to do justice, love kindness and walk humbly with God. AMEN.