

## What is Abundant Living?

***John 10:1-11 (The Message):** Let me set this before you as plainly as I can. If a person climbs over or through the fence of a sheep pen instead of going through the gate, you know he's up to no good — a sheep rustler! The shepherd walks right up to the gate. The gatekeeper opens the gate to him, and the sheep recognize his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he gets them all out, he leads them and they follow because they are familiar with his voice. They won't follow a stranger's voice but will scatter because they aren't used to the sound of it.*

*Jesus told this simple story, but they had no idea what he was talking about. So he tried again. "I'll be explicit, then. I am the Gate for the sheep. All those others are up to no good — sheep stealers, every one of them. But the sheep didn't listen to them. I am the Gate. Anyone who goes through me will be cared for — will freely go in and out, and find pasture. A thief is only there to steal and kill and destroy. I came so they can have real and eternal life, more and better life than they ever dreamed of. I am the Good Shepherd. The Good Shepherd puts the sheep before himself, sacrifices himself if necessary.*

*This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God!*

Well, my brothers and sisters, "Happy Good Shepherd Sunday." Each year, on the 4<sup>th</sup> Sunday after Easter, the lectionary writers — those who pick the Bible texts some churches like ours use for preaching — have us in John 10. All around the world today churches are reading this text. Even our sister congregation in Ghana, West Africa, is reading this text today! And many churches celebrate this as Good Shepherd Sunday. Margie Troike was telling us at the Tuesday Bible study that this was a big deal in her former church — the West End Presbyterian Church in New York City. They even have a potluck every Good Shepherd Sunday so that all the deacons can gather with their "flocks!"

So, in honor of Good Shepherd Sunday, if you have a chance this week, use the search term “sheep and shepherd” in Google Images and see what pops up. Some of you with phones may want to do that even now. Or if you don’t do computers much, try to find a book at the library or some other place that has some pictures of sheep and shepherds. Looking at these images will help give you an idea of what was commonplace back in Jesus’s day. Just as it is common for us to see truck drivers or garbage collectors or even mailmen and women, it was common in Jesus’s day to see shepherds taking care of sheep.

And the image of God as a shepherd was not new to those Pharisees and disciples Jesus was talking to. It is woven throughout Scripture. Surely as Jesus was talking to the disciples and the Pharisees that day, they would have in their hearts and minds the 23<sup>rd</sup> Psalm, sections of Ezekiel and other holy writings of their day. Jesus was letting them know that he was connected to God and that he, like God, their holy parent, was to be like a shepherd to them.

### **A Shepherd *And* a Gate?**

But did you notice that Jesus not only calls himself the Good Shepherd in this text, he also calls himself “the gate?” It’s actually a little confusing, isn’t it? The gatekeeper, the gate, the shepherd, the sheep. All these images. What does it mean that Jesus is “the gate?” Is he a gate and a shepherd? Is he likening himself to a wooden or a metal door that opens and shuts?

Actually, to the people of that time, it may not have been quite as confusing as it is to us that Jesus calls himself the gate and the shepherd. A number of commentaries I read indicated that shepherds back then often acted like human gates in sheep folds. They would get the sheep inside the fold for the evening and then they would sit at the opening and sometimes even sleep at the opening. That way, no sheep could get out, because the shepherd was guarding the entrance. And also, no wolf or other predator could get in by way of that entrance, because the shepherd was guarding that place. The shepherd’s body was literally the gate. Isn’t that quite an image of Jesus as a protective gate to the sheep pen?

One of the things that is striking about looking at pictures of sheep and shepherds is realizing just how clueless the sheep are. They seem to huddle up in groups, not completely aware of where they are going, but following the shepherd. In one picture I saw, there were a couple of sheep that seemed to want to leave the pack, and the shepherd was using his crook to pull them back in the fold.

Think about it a minute. In this text we are all being likened to a bunch of sheep. Kind of clueless. Not really in touch with the dangers and the realities — though we think we are.

How many of you have animals? Most of our animals are kind of clueless about the realities of life, aren't they? Do you ever envy their lives? They don't have to worry about food or water. They don't have to go to work. We will take care of them, get them to the vet, and give them some attention. They really don't have a clue about the care we give them. They surely don't see the big picture or even understand often what is going on in the world. If they go outside, sometimes they get in scraps and messes with other animals. Mostly, they trust us to take care of them and lead them in ways that are for their best health. Mostly, we pet owners are deeply connected to our pets. We love them in ways we can hardly explain. Of course, there are pet owners who aren't good to their pets. But the good pet owners know what I'm talking about.

We are just sheep, my friends. Like our pets are with us, we probably don't have a clue about all that our Shepherd does for us each day, though we think we do. We probably don't really know where the Shepherd is leading us, though we think we do. The good news is that according to this text, Jesus is our Good Shepherd. He is leading us, though we may not be aware of it. And he lays down his very life for us. He protects us in ways we probably don't even realize.

### **What is 'Abundant Life'? Or 'Real Life'?**

Now another thing Jesus tells us that that he, as this Good Shepherd, wants us to have

abundant life. He says there are thieves and wolves that want to destroy us and take our lives away, but this Good Shepherd, this one who sleeps at the gate on our behalf oftentimes, this Shepherd who knows our names — he wants us to have abundant life.

Abundant life, “life real and eternal” is what “The Message” calls it. What is abundant life? What is life that is real? Does that mean there is life that is “unreal?” What is life that is eternal? Does that mean that some things in this life are fleeting? Abundant, real and eternal life. That is what this text tells us the Good Shepherd will lead us to.

Now, if we are confused about shepherds and gates, we might be even more confused about what “abundant life” is. We can be confused about the shepherd and gate images because they are not things most of us see every day in our world. But we may be confused about the abundant life image because we have SO many messages coming at us each day that tell us what abundant life is. Some of the messages in our world can be like those thieves Jesus talks about here — the thieves who try to sneak into the pen and distract and steal the sheep. They may be alluring, but they also can destroy us. These messages can be like thieves that try to sneak into the pen to steal the sheep.

What is the abundant life? What are some of these messages that come to us each day about the good life, about what is real and abundant life? And which ones lead to real abundance, and which ones are the thieves who are coming in to destroy us?

Some prominent messages about abundant life in our culture today have to do with being rich, beautiful and powerful.

- The rich have abundant life, we are told — so get rich and you will have abundant life.
- The beautiful have abundant life, we are told — so lose weight, buy that wrinkle-reducing cream, get Botoxed, lighten your skin, change your hair color. The more beautiful you are the more abundant your life will be.
- The powerful have abundant life, we are told. They don't have to worry about if they will

have health care. They have connections and surely have the resources to do what they want to do and get what they want to get.

Yes, our culture and advertising tell us that money, sex and power are the things that guarantee an abundant life. Now let's be real here. Money, beauty and power sure do make this life easier on many levels, don't they? When one knows they have enough to eat and pay the bills, when one knows they have access to resources to ensure survival, life is easier.

But a life full of money, beauty and power: Will those things, in the final analysis, give us a full and abundant life?

### **Getting to the Core Values**

What kind of abundant life is Jesus trying to lead us into? The word abundance means full to overflowing — more than enough life. What does that mean? What does this shepherd want for us? How does listening for Jesus's voice — instead of the voices of the world — guide us to life that is real and eternal? Those people in Jesus's fold surely didn't have a lot of money or power back in their day. What was Jesus offering them?

This past Thursday night Ted and I had the chance to go to the college scholarship dinner for The First Tee of Benton Harbor. The First Tee is a national nonprofit youth development program that teaches golf to children ages 7 through 18. But it is more than a golf program. Its main goal is to teach what they call the "Nine Core Values," and they do this through getting young people out on the golf course. It was an absolute JOY to hear these young men and women from the Benton Harbor chapter talk about not just succeeding in life, but living with depth and integrity. The program is not a Christian program, and there isn't language about "abundant living," but it does seem that the core values of the program fit in line with the values of the Kingdom of God. The values are: honesty, integrity, sportsmanship, respect, confidence, responsibility, perseverance, courtesy, and judgment. Ebon Sanders and the other leaders of the program are

like shepherds who teach these young people the way.

One of the young women talked about how the perseverance and confidence she learned at The First Tee helped her make it through her first two years of college. The goal of the program is not to create rich and powerful men and women, but to give young people the chance to live successfully, guided by values and love and community. That's abundant living.

### **10 Kingdom Values**

Laurie White from Tango.com recently published an article in Psych Central recently. She writes about characteristics of "happy" people, about people who live full and rich lives. She doesn't use the words "abundant life," and she surely isn't a Christian expounding on any Scripture, but I wonder if her 10 characteristics are more in keeping with how the Shepherd is leading us. I wonder if her 10 thoughts really do fit into the values of the kingdom of God. She writes that happy and content people live the following ways:

1. They practice gratitude.
2. They like their own company and the company of others.
3. They are honest and they tell the truth.
4. They make time for fun.
5. They get enough sleep.
6. They practice forgiveness.
7. They help others.
8. Most days, they enjoy their work.
9. They have healthy relationships.
10. They believe in something.

Think about the times you have taken the time to listen for God's leading in your life. Aren't God's invitations much more in keeping with these 10 things or the core values from First Tee than they are about getting richer, getting more powerful or getting more beautiful? Practicing

gratitude, nurturing our faith, working hard in our jobs, taking care of our bodies, taking time to nurture our relationships with God and each other — all these things are like healthy vitamins for the soul and spirit.

The Good Shepherd calls us by name and invites us into this kind of abundant living. And our part is to be mindful of the voices we are listening to. Are we following the call of the Good Shepherd?

And the thing about this kind of living is that when we really seek to follow the Shepherd in living these ways, we long for this kind of life for all those around us. When we put our energy into the money, sex and power lures, we end up being in competition with each other most of the time and we end up not caring as much about the other people in the world. We need to climb over them to get what we think we need.

But in following our Good Shepherd, we end up longing for ALL people to have what they need. This Good Shepherd knows all the sheep by name — the ones who are rich in this world and the ones who are poor, red, yellow, black, white, gay, straight, Republicans, Democrats, Christians, Muslims, Jews — the Good Shepherd knows all the sheep by name and really does long for all the sheep to live abundantly.

So, my brothers and sisters — my fellow sheep, on this Good Shepherd Sunday let us ask once again for the grace to listen to the voice of the Shepherd calling each of our names. Let us ask for the grace to commit ourselves to the stuff of life — the values that really do lead to abundance. And even as our Shepherd is a gate for us, may we be those who care about all the sheep in the pen — continuing to work so that all the sheep have what they need.

Amen.