

Year A, May 7, 2017  
4 Easter  
Christ Church, Mexia

Alleluia, Christ is risen. (The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.)

This Sunday has become known as "Good Shepherd Sunday," because the Gospel story is from John about Jesus as the shepherd whether it is Year A, B or C. And there is much that can be said about the analogy of the shepherd and Christ. But today I would like to focus more on the last verse of the text, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." If I were to write a personal mission statement for Jesus, I think that would be the place to start.

But I want to begin with a story told by a former Episcopal Bishop who served in the upper Midwest and loved telling stories he learned from Native American Episcopalians. One such story is: "A wise man (of the tribe once) was asked by his grandson about the conflict and discord in the world. The elder reflected for a moment and then replied, 'My child, there are two dogs battling within my heart. One is full of anger, hatred and rage. The other is full of love, forgiveness and peace.' The old man paused, and he and his grandson sat for a moment in silence by the side of the stream. Finally, the boy spoke again, 'Grandfather, which dog will win the battle in your heart? The one filled with hatred, or the one filled with love?' The old man looked at his grandson and replied, 'The one I feed will win.'" We have choices – in just about everything, every day.

In an article in *Christianity Today*, published in 2015, the author wrote, when focusing on John 10:10: "So what does this new life look like? Ask 10 Christians to define abundant life and you will get 14 answers. And perhaps they are right in some way, but, if we are being true with Scriptures, the new life given to us in Christ must mean more than merely material blessings." And then the author concludes: "Abundant life is not about what we have. It's not about what we get. It's not about what we claim. Ultimately, abundant life is about what we receive as a gift from the Lord and to live knowing we are stewards of the blessings of God." I will return to these latter thoughts later.

First, an artist was once asked how he had sculpted such a beautiful elephant from a block of marble. He responded, "Easy really, I simply chipped away all the parts that didn't look like an elephant." Perhaps you've heard this story before. So sometimes it is easier to explain something in the negative, or what it is not. With that in mind let me

share with you some things in which Rick Ezell, a Baptist minister, concludes that life is not found: not in pleasure, not in performance, not in possessions, not in position, and not in pursuits. Rather, it is more than the time we spend between birth and death. And I should add that it is not found in the length of one's life on earth either. So what may it be then?

In *The New International Commentary on the New Testament*, it indicates that, "Life is one of John's characteristic concepts. (The author of John) uses the term 36 times, whereas no other New Testament writing has it more than 17 times (this is Revelation; next comes Romans with 14 times, and 1 John 13 times). Thus, in this one writing (the Gospel of John) there occur more than a quarter of all the New Testament references to life. 'Life' in John characteristically refers to eternal life (see for example 3:15), the gift of God through His Son. Here, however, the term must be taken in its broadest sense. It is only because there is life in the **Logos** that there is life in anything on earth at all." Hold that thought for a minute.

According to William Barclay, "abundantly" means "to have a superabundance of a thing." The Syriac version of this passage however reads (ILO abundantly), "something more abundant" or in other words, something more than life. Or Grace Communion International explains it this way: "...John 10:10 should not be used as though it gives some promise of an improved physical life for the Christian (as it is sometimes preached in the 'prosperity gospel' communities). Such a view, in light of the context, is shallow, and it overlooks the profound truth of the passage. The passage promises superior, superabundant spiritual life, life empowered by the indwelling of Jesus Christ." Now we begin to see a focus or trend. Rick Ezell summarizes: "To be a follower of Jesus, to know who he is and what he means, is to have a superabundance of life. There is a new vitality, a new meaning, a new energy, a new purpose, a new significance, a new outlook, a new hope, a new joy, a new life." In other words, conversion. Finally, in 2 Peter 3:18, we can read, that a Christian's life revolves around "grow(ing) in the grace and knowledge of our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ," which implies that abundant life is a more spiritual life here, and an eternal life with God thereafter.

Now, in the reading from Acts today we heard how the early church, "all who believed," were together and "they would sell their possessions and goods and distribute the proceeds to all, as had any need."

Sadly today, our lives are full of many things. We don't spend as much time together, in worship, in community, as they did in the early church. We seem not to be as good at sharing either. Over the past twenty years, the net worth of the top two percent of American families nearly doubled, while the poorest quarter of American families lost ground. The poorest 10 percent have more liabilities than assets, rising from -\$1,000 in 1984 to -\$9,000 in 2005, according to the University of Michigan's Institute for Social Research. The "trickle down effect" doesn't seem to be working very well.

But before I digress too much, I believe that returning to the article from *Christianity Today* leads us to a reasonable conclusion for today: "It's not a sin to be rich (though it might be missing the point to die rich). Furthermore, stewardship is not measured by what we have received, but by what we have given. At the end of the day, perhaps that is how we know we have an abundant life – when we have shared our life with others. When we have enough of the blessings of God (such as mercy, peace, love, grace, wisdom, etc.) to share with others, and then actually do it; that's when we truly have abundant life." I hope these varied thoughts have given you a better idea of the meaning of abundant life.

But I think that the Native American sage in the story was right. The conflict is always fought out in the human heart. Which dog will you feed?

Alleluia. Christ is risen. (And the people respond) The Lord is risen indeed. Alleluia.

or

In the name of the one God who created us, who redeemed us, and who sustains us. Amen.