

Got Abundant Life?

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John 10:7-10

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What he really wanted was the abundant life. More. He wanted more fame, so he moved to Hollywood and made movies. He won an Oscar for best comedy film in 1927. He wanted more excitement, and so ended up designing and then piloting one of the fastest airplanes in the world (and setting the transcontinental air speed record, Los Angeles to New York in it. His prototype H-1 aircraft is still displayed in the Smithsonian today.) He wanted more money, and at one point bought the majority of shares in TWA for about \$7 million before selling them for \$547 million. He went on to build up and then sell his own airline. He wanted more love, and dated close to a dozen Hollywood starlets before marrying, and then more than once. He wanted more privacy and control over his life, and became increasingly reclusive—living, in the end, for years at a time hidden away in bungalows and penthouses, not bathing very often or trimming his grotesque fingernails or his hair except once a year. His over-the-top fear of germs prevented him from touching anything without a tissue, and he died horribly addicted to morphine and codeine and other meds.

There's more than one way to understand "the abundant life." Howard Hughes had his own; each of us has our own. Jesus had His own. (This morning, and in two weeks, we'll explore how we might better understand and live His kind.)

As we just heard, however, Jesus' understanding of the abundant life is not merely a private matter to Him. According to our gospel lesson in John, He invites every one of His disciples to share in His vision of life, the depth and quality of life He lived. (Our English word "abundant" comes from the Latin "ab" + "undare," which means to come in waves—the same root we hear in "undulate" or "inundate." Any of us living this close to the Pacific knows what this word abundance reflects because we know how the waves just keep coming; how they will drench if not overflow the swimmers or surfers or kayakers out there in the midst of them.)

Jesus' promise "I have come in order that every one of you, My disciples, may live an abundant, overflowing life" is a source of encouragement and blessing to many. If we're honest, though, I think we have to admit this promise also leads to a lot of frustration. I suspect it has caused tens of thousands to end up leaving Jesus and His Church—without necessarily even knowing why.

The problem is that the Church has never done all that well in turning out a lot of disciples of Jesus who actually live out this overcoming, abundant, joyful life. Catholics, Protestant, Orthodox, Pentecostals, (Congregationalists), "other." Plenty of Christians are baptized into the Church as babies or turn their lives over to Jesus with high hopes—and after a few years, maybe a few decades—sooner, if they try very hard—they may be more frustrated than they were when they started. At least before they began to entertain hopes of this "new life" the New Testament keeps talking about they were probably left in peace, more or less content with what this world offers. Then you start taking Jesus seriously and everything is supposed to change and you go to church for years and you try to live better and clean up your bad habits and things don't seem to be going all that much better at all. What's such good news about that?

For some of you in this church—some of our most conscientious people—it may be even worse. You've been to Prayer 101 and got you up a good head of steam. You've established the habit of praying every day. But, truth be told, it has been a while since God showed up and really spoke to you. You carved out time to study some portion of the Scriptures each day, but frankly it's a pretty confusing book and it's not that easy to understand and sometimes it seems like an awful lot of trouble just to find out that we're supposed to trust in God and be loyal and obey Him and act kindly to others and hope to heck there's some kind of heaven. And some of the other disciplines: forget it! Maybe if your spiritual life were a little more exciting, or if you got more fired up you would tell others about Jesus and His Church, but as it is, what's the big deal? And tithing: forget it. I mean most people aren't trying to be freeloaders, but it's tough enough for a lot of families these days getting by when you give 1 or 2% of your income to the church—how would you possibly manage if you tried to give away the full 10%? Besides, it seems like there must be plenty of people more wealthy than you are...And your small group...(actually, if you're really committed to your small group, and being honest with yourself and with them, you're probably enjoying it!)

I hope none of you knows what I'm talking about—that everyone in this house of worship this morning is in the select company of the saints who is living the abundant life Jesus talked about. But I know that's not true, because

for one I'm not always living that way. I get distracted. I get frustrated—with myself, if nothing else. Am I the only one?

I hate this gap: this gap between what Jesus said and what I experience. When He promised, "I have come to earth in order for each of you to live a truly abundant life," and I'm not always feelin' it, it can only mean one of three things. Either I am messing up, doing it wrong, or Jesus was mistaken and He came for some other purposes. (Or, the third possibility, He intended to confer His abundant life into my otherwise normal life, but He is incapable of pulling it off.) None of these choices sounds that comforting to me.

How about you? Are you frustrated? How is your life in Christ going these days? What is the quality of your faith? What is the quality of your life?

I'm afraid it's a measure of how bad the situation has gotten that I even ask the question this way, as if our "faith life" is separated from our life in general. Jesus did not separate out compartments of our lives, promising, "I have come that you might have a nice hour a week on Sunday morning, or that you might enjoy spending time with your mentor or enjoy an ecstatic prayer time now and then—but you're on your own the rest of the time, most of the time, all those other hours of the week." No—His vision is that your life and my life is an entire integrated life lived on a higher plane: a joyful life, an overflowing life. Our work, our relationships, our health, our ability to handle setbacks, our service to others, our surprises, our old age—if we make it that far—everything.

If it helps you feel any better, you and I are not the only ones, or the first, to struggle with this gap, this frustration gap, between the promise of Jesus for the living of our lives, and how we end up living them. According to the Gallup Organization and Barna Group many polls now find self-identified Christians likely to embrace lifestyles just as hedonistic, self-centered, materialistic and sexually immoral as the culture in general. (This raises the question: if about 80% of Americans self-identify as "Christian," exactly who is the control group? But this underscores the whole point: the American Church has not been doing a great job in producing people whose lives mirror the promise of Jesus or the life of Jesus.)

Now if God is God, it doesn't seem fair that we should have to accept full responsibility for this gap...everything is not totally up to me. (But remember God's dilemma: yes, God wants a better world for everyone, and a better life for each of us. Jesus came to live out what God has in mind for us, but Jesus is no longer around. The Holy Spirit has been poured out among us humans, ever since

Pentecost—but God cannot force or coerce or manipulate us. Love has its constraints. And the Holy Spirit can't work impersonally through the ether or air or cyberspace like an electric current: God the Spirit can only work within us and through us to the extent that we are willing. To the extent we quit arguing and trying to negotiate; quit procrastinating and rationalizing and dragging our feet—God can work through us when we freely welcome the Spirit to take over our bodies and our lives and wills and work actively, joyfully, through us.)

This is exactly how Christ can live His abundant life through each of His disciples, and it's exactly what's so scary, and it's exactly why we face this gap of frustration between what we'd like from our faith in Jesus and what we sometimes get. It's a big deal. Who gets to control my body?

The famous martyr and theologian of the last century, Dietrich Bonhoeffer, observed, "When Jesus calls a man, He bids him come and die. [When Jesus calls a woman, He bids her come and die.]" The New Testament uses several different images of this exchange. One is the image of our having to be totally "born again/from above" because we need more than a tweaking or a re-education of our former life and awareness and understanding—we need a new kind of life different from the one we came out of our mother's womb with. (I am no more able to create it and enter into it for myself than I could revive my dying self by giving myself CPR.) Paul speaks of our having been altogether dead in our trespasses and in our sin before that rebirth; of being totally powerless before the power of sin and needing to crucify our old human nature on the cross in order that the power of God might set us free and resurrect us into a new creation. He goes so far as to conclude we can only defeat sin if we die—since sin has no power over a corpse. [The logic of Romans 6:3-8.] Another is the image, and sacrament, of being baptized: our old original "self" is symbolically and ritually drowned, inundated, killed dead—and a new Christ-creation is raised out of the waters. This new nature is in tune with the Spirit, and eager to be indwelt and directed by God.

This is the Scriptural understanding of who we are as Christ-followers, and how we entered into that life. This is a serious business, this choosing or not choosing to live the abundant life which Jesus wants for us and promises for us. It's not enough to try harder; not going to help to push away from Christ or His Church. The choice comes down to who gets to control my will and my body.

How is your life going? How are you doing with this "frustration gap" between the promised life of abundance and joy in Jesus, and what your life feels like, day-to-day?

Just in case, I want to offer a starting point: Redefine your understanding of the abundant life until it matches that of Jesus.

Redefine your understanding of the abundant life. We have been living as human beings and Americans a long time; our conditioning goes very deep. So deep we no longer even notice it. Each of us has a little of Howard Hughes in us: more is better. More confidence. More wealth. More achievement. More mobility. More power. More choices.

More choices may only hamper us. Some of you remember the poet Sylvia Plath: in her book *The Bell Jar*, she describes how her post-Ivy League future loomed before her. "I felt like a racehorse in a world without racetracks...I saw my life branching out before me like a green fig tree. From the tip of every branch, like a fat purple fig, a wonderful fig beckoned and winked. One fig was a husband and happy home and children, and another fig was [to be] a brilliant professor and another fig was [to be] the amazing Editor, and another fig was Europe and Africa and South America, and another fig was [to study] Constantine and Socrates and Attila and a pick of other loves with queer names and offbeat professions and another fig was [to be] an Olympic lady crew champion, and beyond and above these figs were many more figs I couldn't quite make out..."

I saw myself sitting in the crotch of this fig tree, starving to death, just because I couldn't make up my mind which of the figs I would choose. I wanted each and every one of them, but choosing meant losing all the rest, and as I sat there unable to decide the figs began to wrinkle and go black, and one by one they plopped to the ground at my feet."

Choices, choices, choices. I googled "spirituality" last week: 31.4 million hits. On Amazon.com: 123,000 books. We Americans sure are "spiritual," but that may only be keeping us away from God's abundant life. What frustration: starving in the midst of plenty; working ourselves silly or exchanging the days and years of our lives to grasp at prizes which cannot satisfy and which cannot last—while the Bread of Life is freely offered us...

Our vision of the abundant life is also probably warped by our misunderstanding as to what constitutes a peaceful life. Jesus promised, "My peace I give you." He never meant a life empty of friction or strife—in fact He generated friction and strife. (To speak God's truth and to tell people they will never arrive where they want to go as a result of their religious observance, apart from the mercy of God, is to generate strife.) Jesus got Himself killed, for God's sake. His peace is not the uneasy resignation or

truth of silence, but the sure sense of the nearness and the sufficiency and power and love of God no matter the circumstance.

[Catherine Marshall tells the story of a king who held a contest for all the painters in the land—to best portray a scene of complete peace. He narrowed it down to two finalists, and had to choose. One was the picture of serenity: a glass-clear mountain lake nestled under peaks rising to meet an azure sky with calm white cotton puff clouds. The second featured a similar mountain lake—but this one roiling in a torrential downpour backlit by jagged lightning flashes. A furious waterfall cascaded down the face of the mountain, and behind the waterfall was a small bush clinging to the rock face. Within it the king noticed a bird sitting, unruffled in all the spray, on her nest. Explaining his royal selection, the king noted that peace is not the absence of motion or turmoil or trouble—but to be present and mindful in the midst of those things, full of peace in the heart. Like the peace Jesus experienced, and holds out for you and me, His disciples.]

The kind of abundant life Jesus gives us is not the same as we could attain on our own, and God does not measure abundance or success the way we naturally do. Howard Hughes may have wound up in a much better state had he not inherited some wealth, and had he not been so talented and so charming and so brilliant. When God has given us many gifts it's easy to think we simply deserve what we have achieved. It's easy for us competitive ones to compete and compare ourselves against others. There are plenty of means of comparison around Orange County, and we all know how to play this game. For example, last week I was playing golf with Matt and I did fairly OK except for the two back-to-back 9's I shot on the back nine, which is the only nine we played. How many milliseconds do you suppose it took for me to calculate what I would have shot, and who, by the way, would have won, had it not been for those annoying consecutive sextuple bogeys...(Did I mention these were par-3 holes?) For some reason I did not try to calculate, with lightning swiftness, what I would have scored had I thrown out two pars that round. (And this is playing with my my own son, out getting some exercise while bonding with my own-flesh-and-blood. Imagine what I would have been thinking if it had been someone I don't even like!) Don't all our minds work tend to work this way? "He's better at golf? OK, but I'm a lot stronger." "She's CEO of a big company. Yeah, maybe, but my kids are a lot better behaved." Our ways of abundance can look tawdry in the light of His abundance.

If you must compare, how do you compare with Jesus?

But how do you stack up against who you might have been in the sight of God? How well have you let Him shape your life into your full potential, into the divine original He is hoping for? How completely have you abandoned yourself to His indwelling Spirit, and how abundant is the Spirit producing all the fruit of the Spirit within you? (Alexander the Great conquered and controlled the world by age 30—but always lamented that he could not control his own temperament and impulses.) God loves us “anyway”—but we know all too well we do not inherit a joyful or peaceful or abundant life, “anyway.”)

The point is not to feel terrible because we all fail our Lord. (He knows already.) It’s that I will never accept Christ’s invitation to live the new life, His abundant life, if I persist in my belief that everything is fine. Many people try to stay away from Jesus once they figure out He loves them too much to leave them in peace—at least their old kind of peace, which tried to be content with simply hoping for more, striving for more, comparing ourselves with others, and leaving it at that.

The point is not to feel terrible. The point is to use that frustration, that holy discontent. Draw near to God; offer your life all over again to the Holy Spirit freely to be used for Christ’s purposes—according to His definition of abundance.

Joni Eareckson Tada, who knows a great deal about the abundant life which Jesus can offer, describes the way most days unfold for two of her friends. She writes, “Every morning Connie opens Diane’s door to begin the long routine of exercising her severely paralyzed friend. The sun’s rays slant through the blinds, washing the room in a soft, golden glow. The...covers haven’t moved since Connie pulled them up around Diane the night before. Yet she can tell her friend has been awake for awhile.

‘Are you ready to get up yet?’

‘No, not yet,’ comes the reply from under the covers.

The story’s the same each new day at Connie and Diane’s apartment. The routine rarely changes. Sunrise stretches into mid-morning by the time Diane is finally ready to sit up in her wheelchair. But those long hours in bed are significant.

In her quiet [bedroom], Diane turns her head slightly on the pillow toward the corkboard on the wall. Her eyes scan each thumbtacked card and list. Each photo. Each torn piece of paper carefully pinned in a row. The stillness is broken as Diane begins to murmur. She is praying.

Some would look at Diane—stiff and motionless—and shake their heads. She has to be fed everything, pushed everywhere. The limitations of multiple sclerosis

encroach further each year. Her fingers are rigid. Her voice is barely a whisper. People might look at her and say, “What a shame. Her life has no meaning. She really can’t do anything.

But Diane is confident, convinced her life is significant. Her labor of prayer counts. She moves mountains... she helps open the eyes of the spiritually blind...she aids homeless mothers...single parents...abused children... despondent teenagers... handicapped boys...and dying and forgotten old people in the nursing home down the street where she lives.

This meek and quiet woman sees her place in the world; it doesn’t matter that others may not recognize her significance in the grand scheme of things.” [from *Stories for the Heart*, Multnomah, p 230]

Diane, too, wants More. She wants more to offer every ounce of energy she has left, and every minute of every day remaining to her, as her gift back to God. She wants for the indwelling Holy Spirit of God to be able to utilize her body and spirit without hindrance.

She wants even more to please her Lord Jesus.

John 10:7-10

So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.