

Abundant Life!

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UMC Geneva

“I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” Who was Jesus referring to when he said “they?” That they may have life, and have it abundantly? Context makes all the difference in the world, doesn’t it! The context here is the Gospel of John chapter 10. And Jesus’ statement here in verse 10 of John 10 stands smack dab in the middle of one of his famous “I Am” sayings found only in John’s Gospel. The context is Jesus’ discourse in which he reveals himself as the Good Shepherd. And the “they” refer to his sheep! And who are his sheep? His followers! His disciples! The ones he loves. The ones he calls by name. The ones who follow Jesus because they know his voice.

More to the point, what does Jesus mean when he refers to “abundant life?” The ancient Greeks certainly grappled with this question – only they wrestled with it in terms of the “good life.” “What is the good life?” they asked. And their philosophers came up with a plethora of answers. Some of those answers are certainly popular in American culture today. Answers in the form of “isms.” And there are three such “isms” that are especially popular these days. *Hedonism* is one such answer that attracts many. It’s the notion that the good life, that true happiness, will be found in search of pleasure. Hedonism is the ethical theory that pleasure (in the sense of the satisfaction of desires) is the highest good and proper aim of human life.

Materialism is another popular answer for many in search of happiness and the abundant life. If I can just accumulate enough wealth...if I can have this thing or that thing...I’ll be happy. As with pleasure, there is nothing wrong with things and wealth in and of themselves. Folks run into problems, however, when “things” and “wealth” take center stage in their lives. Jesus, however, reminds us that life does not consist in the abundance of things.

And if you don’t believe Jesus, then believe Adam Hamilton and what he has to say in his excellent little book *Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity*. In this book Hamilton certainly does not advocate that we live in poverty but that we cultivate contentment and re-evaluate what constitutes the “good life.” He goes on to say that there is no sin in having wealth. Money and

things are morally neutral in themselves. It is the love of money and things that Scripture tells us is the root of all evil.

A third “ism” that permeates our culture’s pursuit of the “good life” is *egoism*. That’s the notion that the good life, the abundant life is found in pursuing one’s self-interest. Now don’t get me wrong. There’s nothing wrong with taking care of ourselves, pursuing good health and developing strong self-esteem. But like hedonism and materialism, we run into trouble when we become absorbed with ourselves and end up living a self-centered existence. Again, Jesus corrects this perspective on the good life by teaching his disciples through precept and example that “he came to serve – not to be served – and to give his life for others.”

In his book *Man’s Search for Meaning*, psychologist Victor Frankl, himself a survivor of the holocaust, asserts that happiness and the good life are a by-product of giving ourselves to a person or a cause greater than ourselves...a cause that involves serving others.

This past Thursday was the 50th anniversary of Earth Day. And with the help of our Creation Care team at church we have turned the month of April into an “earth” month through special studies and devotionals and events such as the showing of the movie *Kiss the Ground* yesterday. Today’s sermon is part of our celebration of Earth Day. “So, how in the world does this talk about abundant living relate to the celebration of Earth Day?” you ask. And my answer is, “Perfectly!” “How so?” you demand. How so? By extending Jesus’ teaching and example that abundant life comes in serving God and serving others. The beautiful thing is that it doesn’t just stop there – serving others. Jesus, through his teaching, life, death and resurrection extended the notion of serving others beyond an anthropocentric or human perspective to an eco or environmental perspective. He came to save and to serve not just humankind but creation itself. In other words, the scope of salvation extends beyond the individual, the family, the local community of humans and society at large. The scope of salvation offered in Jesus extends on out to creation.

Our two scripture readings today – from the Gospel of John and the letter to the Colossian church have something in common. And what is that? Both books contain the highest Christology or view of Christ you’ll find anywhere in the entire

New Testament. How? Well, they both offer the clearest examples of what theologians call the Cosmic Christ...the Christ who alongside God was the agent of creation. The Christ whose mission it was to serve and to save not only humans but creation itself. How? Through the cross of Christ. I love the way Colossians 1:19-20 puts it when it says that "For in him, in Jesus, all the fullness of God was pleased to dwell, and through him God was pleased to reconcile to himself to all things, whether on earth or in heaven, by making peace through the cross." Get it? Jesus came to serve and to save not only humans but all of creation.

And here's the point friends. Listen carefully. If abundant life...if meaningful life...if the good life comes through service, then abundant living following the example of Christ entails serving the earth, saving the earth.

Earth Day 1970 was the brain child of a young Senator from Wisconsin by the name of Gaylord Nelson. Senator Nelson tapped into the youthful energy of the anti-Viet Nam war efforts of young college students. He and many others channeled this same energy to address pressing environmental concerns. The stage had already been set by Rachel Carson's NY Times best-selling book *Silent Spring* - a watershed book that issued a wakeup call to America. We were consuming vast amounts of leaded gas driving massive, inefficient cars. Industries across our land were belching out smoke and sludge and poison with little fear of any consequences. Air pollution was commonly accepted as the smell of prosperity.

Believe me, I know, because I was a sophomore in H.S. in Akron Ohio in 1970 – Akron, the rubber capital of the world. And we lived just blocks away from a string of huge Firestone Tire manufacturing plants that spewed foul smelling, acrid smoke from their giant towers night and day. Not far across town were the huge tire plants of Good Year, Good Rich and Seiberling. Much of their waste was dumped into the Cuyahoga River that ran through town and on up through industrial Cleveland and into Lake Erie. You know something is wrong when the Cuyahoga River caught on fire in Cleveland and they had a devil of a time trying to put it out! Like so many of our neighbors and friends, our community was largely oblivious to the environmental and health concerns that runaway industrialization posed.

Earth Day 1970 provided a prophetic voice on behalf of creation. It gave voice to an emerging environmental consciousness that put environmental concerns on the front page!

If you want to experience the good life...the abundant life...Jesus shows us the way. Serve others. As Rotary Club's motto puts it: "Service over self." Biblically, this notion of service extends beyond humans to creation – the environment. Contrary to the popular opinion that the Bible gives permission for humans to exploit and subdue creation, Hebrew Bible scholar Terrence Freithem points out that in the biblical story of creation, we humans are part and parcel of creation. And rather than exploit creation, the Hebrew verb for "subdue" has a deeper meaning in keeping with the character of a benevolent God. The Hebrew word "subdue," you see, is better understood in the sense of tilling, cultivating, enhancing and yes – servicing the earth.

So how exactly do we experience "abundant life" or the "good life" according to Jesus and the scriptures? The good life is a life of service – to God, to others, and yes, to God's good creation! Amen.

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