

Living Abundantly

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“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” – John 10:10

If our church had a scriptural tag line, as some churches do, we could do much worse, I think, than this morning’s text, which says, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

Isn’t that what Christianity is all about – abundant living? Isn’t that what Jesus came to do for us – to show us what abundant living looks like?

I know that’s not what most Christians think, which is why I know I’m not like most Christians. Most Christians think Jesus came to earth so that we can go to heaven when we die. But Easter, that season we’re living in right now, tells us something different. The Easter stories tell us that Jesus’ teachings, life, death, and resurrection were for our salvation here, not hereafter. The hereafter we have to leave to God. It’s not life after death that we should be concerned about, but life before death, because that’s the abundant life Jesus Christ promises to everyone.

What a radical idea for the time we live in. “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” We live in a world that deals in suffering, violence, the threat of violence, and death, and Jesus said that he came so that the world might have more abundant life; the contrast is striking. Can you see the difference between the way of life Jesus came to bring us and the way of life we have chosen for ourselves? Can you see why I say that the very last thing any of us who are followers of Jesus should want is to fit into the death-dealing world of business-as-usual?

John doesn’t elaborate on what Jesus meant by abundant life, but we might get a little better understanding of that concept if we take a closer look at our reading from Acts, and that’s where I’d like for us to spend our time this morning, looking at what a Spirit-filled church looks like when it’s living abundantly.

In his first sentence, Luke tells us three things about the folks who were persuaded by Peter’s sermon: (1) they devoted themselves to the apostles’ teaching and fellowship; (2) they devoted themselves to the breaking of bread; and (3) they devoted themselves to the prayers.

We’re reading this morning from a book called the Acts of the Apostles, so let’s be clear about what an apostle is. An apostle, contrary to what a child once wrote in Sunday School, is not the husband of an epistle. Nor is an apostle a super-disciple. An apostle is a missionary, who has been equipped with two things necessary for the work of mission: a body of teaching about Jesus and a charismatic gift of ministry, both of which have been handed on in the church’s ministers from generation to generation.

There’s nothing magical about either of these things, despite the impression that you can sometimes get by watching the laying on of hands during an ordination service.

All Christian ministers are expected to be educated about Jesus. In our tradition, we take that education as a given, and one of the things that distinguishes our congregation is that you insist on calling well-educated ministers. One of my predecessors and one of the first ministers of this congregation was the Rev. Dr. Charles C. Wallick, who had a Master of Divinity degree from Yale and a Ph.D. in church history from the University of Edinburgh. Charlie was a well-educated minister.

You called me to be your minister in part because of the education that I have. And for as long as this church is able, you will call as your minister people who have demonstrated some degree of

mastery of that vast body of teaching that makes up the intellectual content of the Christian faith. Christianity has content, and it has had content from the very beginning, and it was the responsibility of the first apostles to learn that content and hand it on. That's the first piece of what the church calls "apostolic succession."

The second piece is the charismatic gift of ministry. Now when we American Protestants hear the word "charismatic," we automatically think of a particular style of worship. But what charismatic originally meant is graced by the Holy Spirit with a divine gift. And the divine gift that is part of apostolic succession is the divine gift of ministry.

In the Christian tradition, we believe that people are called to ministry. They don't decide to go into ministry in the way that they decide to go into, say, engineering or sports management. You go into ministry because you sense that God is asking you to live in a certain way based on your trust of the truth of Jesus' way of life. You believe that his way can and should be your way – and everyone's way as well, as they are able to live it out. That's what it means to believe in Jesus. It doesn't mean you think Jesus existed, which is what most people mean when they say they believe in God. To believe in Jesus is to trust your life to the way of life he showed us how to live. That's what belief consists of – trusting and acting.

And ministers are nothing more than true believers. That is, we trust in Jesus' way with a degree of confidence that many people lack. We are convinced of the truth of the gospel in such a way that we are prepared to sacrifice years of our lives to study, accept a position in society that no longer commands much respect and has never earned much money, and work for the betterment of all creation and not just an isolated part of it.

So when that early Spirit-filled church devoted itself to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, they were devoting themselves to digging deeper into the story of Jesus and its implications for their lives, and they were participating in the life of fellowship of Jesus' followers.

The second thing they did was devote themselves to the breaking of bread, that is, to meals together.

Now this doesn't appear to be communion. It may be, but the context in Acts suggests ordinary meals. But as I said to you last week, no meal is ordinary, which is why you should always say grace whenever you eat.

To have enough to eat on a reliable basis is a blessing very few generations prior to ours took for granted, which is probably why Luke mentions breaking bread not once but twice in these six verses. And in verse 46, he says that the early Christians ate their food with "glad and generous hearts." Isn't that what a meal is supposed to do – make us glad and generous? I wonder if the offering in the plates and the smiles on your faces would increase if we started, rather than ended Sunday mornings with table fellowship?

As most of you know, I hate coffee hours and I love church suppers. When it comes to getting together to eat as a church, I prefer to be all in. I know many of you don't share that opinion, however, and so we'll still have coffee hour for the foreseeable future. But give me the midweek Lenten suppers any day. Give me the chance to help people feed people. Give me the chance to put the fork on the left and the knife on the right and ask Sally where the napkin goes. Give me the chance to put away while someone washes and someone else dries. Give me the chance to enjoy Gail's sliders or Kathy's soup or Dave's pot pie or Phyllis' mother's sausage ring.

Table fellowship is one of the surest signs of community, and what Luke is telling us is that one of the gifts of the Holy Spirit at Pentecost was the coming together of community around the table. And not just the people in the chairs. A meal embodies memory, experience, gratitude, and the labors of others so that we can enjoy being in one another's presence. That's why our communion liturgy describes the bread and wine as God's gifts, "fruit of the earth and human labor." Just because we mess with it doesn't make it any less a gift from God. Bread and wine are not part of the diet of hunters and

gatherers. Bread and wine require group effort, the coming together of the community at an earlier stage of the meal to make the latter stage possible.

And we never want to forget that the privilege of eating that we enjoy depends not only on farmers and grocers, but also on the sun and the soil and the rain and the wind all operating in just such a way as to yield lots of wonderful things to keep us and all the rest of creation alive. That's why we include the trees of the field in our communion liturgy; nature praises God by being the beautiful and bountiful miracle that God created it to be.

So the miraculous blessing of meals is the second thing the Spirit-filled church in Acts devoted itself to.

The third thing that this Spirit-filled church did was say its prayers. Luke uses the definite article, "the prayers," indicating that his hearers would know which prayers he was talking about. A few verses later he says that these Jewish Christians spent much time in the temple, so the prayers were probably the three daily prayers that observant Jews offer every day.

I hope and pray that all of you pray many times a day. The English poet Christopher Smart used to drop to his knees in the streets of London when he was overcome by the urge to pray, and when I reach the crest of the hill in Euclid Creek Reservation, I still find myself praying the opening words of the hymn, "O mighty God, when I survey in wonder." I don't plan ahead of time to say those words; they just come into my mind and quicken my spirit as I look into the hillsides covered in green. It happens in the winter, too, and in the fall. In fact, there's no time of year when those words aren't my prayer of thanksgiving for the beautiful place which we're privileged to call home.

And when I look out my front window to my neighbor's house across the street, I always say a little prayer for that family, whose younger son is very ill. And when I'm surrounded by the produce section in Dave's Market, I always thank God for the abundant bounty to which so many of us have access. And when I sit down in my study to write my weekly sermon, I thank God for the many scholars and ministers and all of you out there in Pewville who assist me in my work. I pray all the time.

The prayers that the church in Acts may have said may have been structured for them, just as we have structured prayers here on Sunday morning, but that structure is simply to help you form the habit of prayer, a habit that is intended to become so automatic that it's reflexive.

One of our members, raised in the Roman Catholic church, still makes the sign of the cross at the sound of a siren, which is a brief way of praying for someone in distress and for those who have responded to that distress. And as some of you know, I learned the Lord's Prayer from a nun who came to our house when I was a little boy to nurse my mother after she'd had a radical mastectomy, and to this day I have to resist the urge to begin every prayer, as Sister did, by crossing myself and saying, "In the name of the Father, and the Son, etc."

Prayer comes in many forms, but what all genuine prayers have in common is their opening up of our hearts and minds to the presence of God's Holy Spirit, and the directing of our attention, however briefly, away from ourselves and toward God and others. Even Jesus' prayer for himself in the Garden of Gethsemane ended by focusing on God's will: "yet not what I want, but what you want."

And because of prayer's power to draw us in the Spirit's tether, as the hymn puts it, prayer is essential to abundant living. Authentic prayer, even for ourselves, draws us toward the divine, toward creation, and toward others who have prayed as we have, and prayer helps us place our lives – our hopes, our fears, and our concerns – in the vast and eternal context of a love, again, as the hymn puts it, "that wilt not let us go." Prayer is one of the best ways I know of to free ourselves from the captivity to ourselves.

And this is no small matter. I know you weary of my telling you that the Christian faith is about getting over ourselves, but how many of the people who have shot up post offices or college campuses or theaters have been described as isolated and angry loners, young men who couldn't get over

themselves, their grudges, their resentments, their obsessions with personal grievances, or their warped perception of religion?

People with healthy relationships do not break out in senseless rage and violence against innocent or even guilty others, and prayer, above all else, is about the most important relationship any of us will ever have.

And the relationship that begins with God leads us inevitably to others. Prayer is the first step in serving others, which is why it was entirely appropriate for us to begin our service this morning with a prayer for the Bread for the World letter-writing we're going to do after church. Serving others is always rooted in prayer.

Pray for creation in general, pray for others specifically, and pray often. Better yet, as Paul advised the Thessalonians, "pray without ceasing."

So those are three components of abundant living that Luke describes of an early, Spirit-filled Christian church: immersion in the church's teaching tradition and fellowship, sharing meals, and daily prayer. The church, in its wisdom, recognized already by the time Luke wrote the book of Acts that the Spirit brings us to love God holistically or, as Deuteronomy put it, with all our mind, all our strength, and with all our soul – mind, body, soul – teaching, meals, prayer. If that isn't abundant living, I don't know what is.