

LIVE FULLY

John 10:1-10

David Buttrick, a former preaching professor, once wrote, "...our lives are as brief as the hyphen between the dates on a gravestone." And the point remains: It is not how long we live, but how well, how fully we live that hyphen. How do we live this hyphen between the dates of our birth and our death? What gives us the quality of fullness to our living?

A couple of years ago there was a lot of buzz about a new book/movie called *The Secret* by Rhonda Byrne. The buzz was about the promise this book gave to people about living an abundant life. The basic intention of the team behind the book is to "bring joy to billions around the world...It doesn't matter who you are or where you are, The Secret can give you whatever you want." The people who put this work together believe that most of the pain in our world is unnecessary and that we can find a different way to live fuller lives. Millions of people have watched the film and read the book in hope of learning the secret to what gives us life and happiness. The basic premise of the book is the law of attraction, i.e., basically that we can attract to ourselves whatever we want in life if we have positive mental images and positive ways about us. There is a lot of truth to this premise because when we have a negative attitude about life, we often focus on the negative in every situation. Yet, there is a lot more to living a life of fullness than just attracting positive things to ourselves in a materialistic way such as a house, a job, a boat, etc. Living life fully can mean choosing to suffer for the sake of another. Living life fully can mean standing up in the face of an oppressive system to work for justice. Living fully can mean going to jail for disobeying an unjust law or war.

Our Gospel reading this morning talks about Jesus as the good shepherd who brings us fullness of life. But the fullness of life that Jesus calls us to is not a life that does not have suffering or pain in it. It is a life that is filled with the presence of the Spirit and our deep connection to God and others in the midst of our struggles and pain.

The Gospel of John was written by a Jewish Christian for and in a Jewish Christian community that was in conflict with the synagogue authorities of its day (represented in the Gospel as "the Pharisees" or "the Jews"). So the community that heard this message as well as the original people who heard these words of Jesus were not strangers to pain themselves. They knew that the fullness of life that Jesus talked about was not that of material wealth or lack of pain and suffering in life. In the story of the sheep and the shepherd, Jesus is using a most familiar metaphor for his disciples. The disciples and the people of that region of the country would understand sheep and shepherds because this was their way of life. Yet, the image of a shepherd also carried political significance because David was a shepherd king. So, Jesus as the shepherd is not only providing for the spiritual life of the people but also for all of their lives. He cares about their lives in their entirety.

Life and eternal life are dominant themes in the Gospel of John. Whereas the Kingdom of God is the dominant motif in Jesus' teachings in the first three gospels, "life" is the dominant motif in John's gospel. The Gospel of John only uses the word, "kingdom" 4 times but uses the word, "life", 47 times. In the New Testament as a whole, there are 216 references to the word, "life." The Gospel of John uses the word, "life," in a similar way that the first three gospels use the word, "kingdom." Jesus came to give life and still comes today to give abundant life now and also after death. This abundant life is not about promises for the future after we die or about promises of prosperity right here. It is about living fully because we live the real purpose of life: a life that is centered and connected to the presence of God in us, around us and in others. Living fully in God allows us the freedom from ambition, greed and fear.

We waste so much of our lives pursuing all kinds of illusions of what abundant life is about because we forget that life is about being centered in God. We spend a great deal of our lives chasing dreams about security, material wealth, power, esteem, and fame. Boston Globe columnist, Ellen Goodman once wrote, "'Normal' is getting dressed in clothes that you buy for work, driving through traffic in a car that you are still paying for, in order to get to the job that you need so you can pay for the clothes, car, and the house that you leave empty all day in order to afford to live in it."

But the abundant life is not about any of these illusions. In 2004, the Rev. Susan Andrews, the moderator of the General Assembly shared in a sermon that when she was in Cameroon, she told a woman there about her disappointment with the translation of the World Alliance of Reformed Churches for John 10:10 using the word "fullness" instead of the word "abundance." Jesus says, "I have come that you might have life

in all its fullness” - rather than the more familiar, “I have come that you might have life, and have it more abundantly.” Her friend Setri said, “Well, that was an intentional decision. You see, here in Africa, the temptation is to buy into the western love of materialism - to live according to a theology of prosperity - to focus on human satisfaction and greed rather than humble gratitude for the utterly free, overflowing grace of God. In Africa, abundance is immediately understood as an abundance of things - not the abundance of spirit and grace that Jesus describes. And so that’s why we chose the translation, “life in all its fullness.”

Prevention Magazine recently published some of the most exciting research in positive psychology, a discipline that aims not just to relieve suffering but also to increase happiness. For the past 6 years, Martin E. P. Seligman, PhD, and his colleagues have been working to unlock the secrets of living the good life. Seligman, founding director of the Positive Psychology Center at the University of Pennsylvania and author of *Authentic Happiness*, has found that the key to happiness appears to lie in our internal qualities and character strengths, not in external events. Combing through questionnaire responses from more than 5,000 study participants, the researchers found that happiness was most strongly associated with a core subset of the character-trait list that they labeled heart strengths: gratitude, hope, zest, and the ability to love and be loved. Topping the charts was love.

With Christ as our shepherd we are invited to the freedom of living out our unique purpose in life that serves others. With Christ as our shepherd we are moved not only to live fully ourselves but also to help others live fully. I don’t know what living fully looks like for each of you because we are all unique in the ways we receive and give love. So, I hope that you will use the Faith in Action piece that is in your bulletin to examine your life and see how you are called to allow the Spirit of God to fill your life to allow you the fullness of the Shepherd’s love so that our whole world is transformed into a place of love where all are allowed to live the fullness of life.

In his book, *God Has a Dream*, Archbishop Desmond Tutu describes what fully realized abundant life in Christ will look like. Reflecting on 25 years of transformation in South Africa - a miracle brought by God despite the sinfulness of hatred and division -Tutu writes: “If you were in heaven now you would notice the tears in God’s eyes. The tears streaming down God’s face as God looked on us and saw the awful things that we, God’s children are doing to each other. God cries and cries. And then you might see the smile that was breaking over God’s face like sunshine through the rain, almost like a rainbow. You would see God smiling because God was looking on you and noting how deeply concerned you are. And the smile might break out into a laugh as God said, “You have vindicated Me. I had been asking Myself: ‘Whatever got into Me to create that lot? And when I see you, yes, you,” God says, “you are beginning to wipe the tears from My eyes because you care. Because you care and you have come to learn that you are not your brother’s or sister’s keeper. You are your brother’s brother and your sister’s sister.” And God says, “I have no one except you.” (Doubleday: 2004, pp. 127-8)

The Spirit of Christ, the Good Shepherd, moves us to focus on what is really important in life. One day, a young woman was walking home from work when she saw a little girl standing on the street corner, begging. The little girl's clothes were paper thin and dirty, her hair matted and unclean, and her cheeks red from the cold. The young woman dropped a few coins in the begging bowl, gave the girl a smile and walked on. As she walked, she started to feel guilty. How could she go home to her warm house with its full pantry and well supplied wardrobe while this little girl shivered on the street? The young woman also began to feel angry, angry with God. She let her feelings be known in a prayer of protest. "God, how can you let these sorts of things happen? Why don't you do something to help this girl?" And then, to her surprise God answered, "I did do something. I created you." May we all live life fully to share and receive God’s love. May it be so for all of us. Amen!

FAITH IN ACTION [next page]

FAITH IN ACTION

Living fully through the guidance of Christ, the Good Shepherd, leads us to focus our lives on giving and receiving love. Below is an invitation for you for a soulful examination of your life. This is not to judge your life as good or bad. It is meant to help you align your life with the life of the Spirit in order to live a joyful life.

Give an overall evaluation of how your time and energy is divided:

Work/Volunteer/chores _____

Relationships/friends/family _____

Contemplation/prayer _____

Nature _____

Celebration _____

= 100%

What would your ideal personal life look like:

Work/Volunteer/chores _____

Relationships/friends/family _____

Contemplation/prayer _____

Nature _____

Celebration _____

= 100%

What do I need to pray about for realigning my priorities?