

HAVING LIFE ABUNDANTLY

A Sermon by Dean Scotty McLennan
University Public Worship
Stanford Memorial Church
April 17, 2005

I can remember thinking as a child in Sunday school that the Christian life sounded pretty burdensome. "Take up your cross." "Give away all that you have." "Sacrifice." "Follow the straight and narrow way." Basically, it didn't sound like a lot of fun. Did Christians ever laugh and play? Did they ever just hang out? Did they ever do anything I'd now call frivolous or indulgent? A grown up named Walter Lippmann had written decades before in his *Preface to Morals*: "It is a fact and a most arresting one, that in all the great religions...it is taught that one of the conditions of happiness is to renounce some of the satisfactions which people normally crave...Wherever people have thought at all carefully about what constitutes a good life, they have concluded that an essential element in any human philosophy is renunciation."ⁱ A biblical commentary articulates my childhood feelings in this rather elegant way: "The Christian mode of life must be an intolerably dull and boring affair, a repressing of what everyone wants to do, a forcing of oneself to comply with what nobody could wish or choose, a shivering with chattering teeth in the gloom of a chilly monastic twilight."ⁱⁱ

Then I stumbled upon Jesus' wonderful words at the end of this morning's gospel lesson:ⁱⁱⁱ "I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly." Now you're talking! What a breath of fresh air! The abundant life, not the life of renunciation. Out of the cold gloom into the warm sunlight. Maybe laughter and playfulness and fun have a role after all. So Christianity took on a completely different cast for me. I began seeing things like the joy of unconditional love that Jesus represented. I started experiencing holy days as holidays or occasions for celebration, not just obligation. It became a kick to sing in church and to listen to the magnificence of the organ. I came to delight in the sense of friendship and community I could have in church.

And not just friendship and community with other people. As today's gospel lesson promises, Jesus himself knows me by name, calls to me personally, takes me into his loving care, and leads me out of the sheepfold into greener pastures. Jesus is the Good Shepherd.^{iv} This is a powerful image -- much more so, of course, in a society of pastoral peoples in the ancient Mideast of two thousand years ago. There are more than five hundred references to sheep in the Bible.^v Sheep were the total livelihood of many peoples of the Old and New Testaments. They provided virtually everything from milk to drink^{vi} to wool for the weaving of clothing.^{vii} Likewise, good shepherds were totally devoted to the well-being of their sheep, making sure the animals always had everything needed for their sustenance. They made certain that their sheep had life, and had it abundantly.

The image of Jesus as Good Shepherd has maintained its hold on the Christian imagination down through the centuries, portrayed in art and sung about in hymns. It's influenced the notion of Christian ministry so thoroughly, that in a number of

denominations the ordained leader of a congregation is referred to as "pastor" and ministerial counseling is called "pastoral care."^{viii} Pastor is simply the Latin word for shepherd. In the Latin translations of the New Testament, the term "pastor" is used equally to refer to those who actually herd sheep, to Jesus himself, and to leaders of the emerging church of the first century after the death of Jesus.

What exactly does a good shepherd do? The classic statement is in the Twenty-third psalm, perhaps the best-known passage in the entire Bible.^{ix} With a shepherd, the sheep shall not want. They will be supplied with food for their hunger in green pastures, fluid for their thirst in still waters, and rest, as they need it. When they're on the move, they will be protected from predators and thieves by the shepherd, whose reputation ("for his name's sake"^x) depends on leading them on the right paths, protecting them with a weapon of defense (a rod) and pulling them out of tough spots with a staff. This is true even when they must cross through dark valleys of death, where it's known that beasts of prey lurk and robbers operate. In a word a shepherd represents love incarnate. In the Twenty-third Psalm, God is described as the ultimate shepherd, and God's goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives. In today's gospel lesson from John, Jesus is described as the ultimate shepherd, and his intimacy with each of us is so close that he knows our own names; ideally we, in turn, know his voice and follow him, distinguishing his voice from those of bandits and thieves who are all around, ready to steal and kill and destroy. Living an abundant life doesn't mean it's all a cakewalk in the realities of this world.

I'd like to flesh out this idea of shepherding and abundant life with an example from my first book that I cited from this pulpit several years ago in another context.^{xi} It's the story of a woman to whom I've given the pseudonym Donna Radley. Donna grew up as a Protestant Christian in an affluent Californian suburb. She went to Sunday school every week and Bible camp every summer, and she thought "being good" was what it meant to follow Christ: "Thank you God, for what I've been given. I'm sorry, God, for the bad things I've done." This Christian life started feeling rather dull and boring for her, though, and by high school she began going to parties, drinking quite a bit, and exploring sexuality with a boyfriend -- as she put it, "Doing a few things I didn't want God to know about." As a consequence, she began distancing herself from her Christian community and from God, figuring that if she couldn't see God, God couldn't see her. As she put it, "I adopted an all-or-nothing philosophy," because "I didn't see any way to follow Jesus and still do what I wanted." Abandon the shepherd in order, she thought, to have the abundant life.

"Drugs, sex and rock-and roll," as we used to call it, continued to dominate in her undergraduate years, but then she married her college sweetheart soon after graduation and settled down. She started going to church again with her husband, but it increasingly seemed like a chore. She wasn't able to do all the church seemed to be asking of her, and her prayer life felt like a laundry list that wasn't even remotely spiritual, as she struggled to take care of her growing family, hold down a part-time job, and maintain a household. Her marriage became troubled, and ten years into it she decided to take her two children and leave her husband. She remembers this as the most difficult period of her life, when she desperately needed a shepherd to help her through the hardships. Yet, as she explains it, "I crossed faith off my list until further notice...I assumed God would disapprove entirely, and I figured I had enough to do without convincing Him."

Soon she was reading about Buddhism and meditating. Not only did this settle her and help her relax, but also she didn't feel judged, and there was a sense of some spiritual doors opening. Then a friend suggested she attend the nearby Quaker meeting, and that gave her just what she felt she needed at the time: "Just some quiet and an acknowledgement of a presence." Later, though, she had the desire to add good music, regular communion and a sense of ritual to her worship. Before long she had become a regular at her local Episcopal Church. By this time her childhood notions of church as dull and boring renunciation -- as Lippman's "shivering with chattering teeth in the gloom of a chilly monastic twilight" -- had been turned around 180 degrees: "I began seeing not only that my being good wasn't God's chief concern, but that, in an entirely different way, God was good. Not good as in 'behave yourself,' but good. Like pizza and beer for dinner when you're tired and hungry. Like a hot bath, or a great day, or holding your kids: that kind of good. And I wanted more of Him." How's that for lying down in green pastures and being led beside still waters? For having one's soul restored?

As Donna began spending more time reading the Bible, this message came through again and again in many places: "Do not be afraid, for I am with you always." As her life fears eased and her self-confidence grew, she began reading in a new way the great commandment she'd known from childhood: "You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind." She used to see this merely as a command. Now she began seeing it as a promise. As she put it, "I was beginning to want to love this God, and that verse seemed to tell me I would learn how." You shall love the Lord your God...

Then she came upon the richly sensual love poetry of the Song of Songs, and something new began to stir within her. The book begins, "Let him kiss me with the kisses of his mouth!" Donna thought, "That's You [God]? That's what You're like?" She explains, "There was a passion and an intimacy I hadn't known, as though that distant family member I'd imagined wasn't so, but a lover -- a case of mistaken identity. I felt I was being not called so much, but beckoned -- a hard-to-resist and provocative "Come over here. Come here. Come.' And I began falling in love with Him."

Finally, with a new boyfriend, she started going to Catholic Mass. There she was mystically transported. Here's how she describes it: "I was always amazed afterward! I found the Mass beautiful and powerful, and the presence I sensed there was so different from who I'd thought God was. It was as though I'd had everything upside down. At Mass, God was a mystery, and we were called not to figure Him out, but simply to experience him." From then on, Donna no longer went to church to please God, but to be fed. And she began to feel deeply loved.

I'm quite moved by Donna's story, as one contemporary description of what it feels like to be shepherded, and what it feels like to have life abundantly. Jesus as the Good Shepherd keeps calling us to follow him. We need to recognize his voice among those of the competing thieves and bandits of the world. They're often telling us that the Christian path is at best dull and boring, and at worst a kind of death walk, utterly renouncing of all human satisfaction. Yet, Jesus has actually come that we may have life, and have it abundantly. He's a shepherd leading us to green pastures and still waters; he restores our souls. This is not to say that life is easy. There'll be times when we walk through the valley of the shadow of death. Yet, as a good shepherd, Jesus will always walk beside us, and sometimes even pick us up and carry us. Also, like a good host, he

will prepare a table before us in the presence of our enemies, anoint our heads with oil, and fill our cups to overflowing.

Here I'm reminded of his Last Supper with his Disciples, which was indeed prepared in the presence of Jesus' enemies, even as he shared the wine and bread with his pastoral companions. None of us are promised a certain number of years on this earth. Jesus himself had barely more than thirty. None of us are promised an easy pilgrimage. We may indeed have to face our own cross. All we are promised is God's presence with us every step of the way, as a constant, loving companion, if only we'll accept that presence. And that presence doesn't stop with our physical death. We live on in God's all-embracing, all-loving arms, for all eternity. Surely, there are lots of ways to image that afterlife, from Christian heaven to Buddhist Nirvana, or by more poetic imagery like coming from the great warm ocean of being, having a moment of individual consciousness as a drop from a breaking wave, and then re-merging into the ocean of being- Yet, it's hell on earth, if not hell for all eternity, to separate oneself from the love of God as we all do from time to time, as Donna Radley's story illustrates.

Jesus the Christ came into this life with a powerful message of love. He came that we might have life, and have it abundantly. With acceptance of the love of Christ, the love of God, surely goodness and mercy shall follow us all the days of our lives, and we shall dwell in the house of the Lord forever. AMEN.

NOTES

-
- ⁱ Walter Lippmann, A Preface to Morals (New York: Macmillan Co., 1929), p. 156.
- ⁱⁱ Interpreter's Bible (New York: Abingdon Press, 1952), Vol. 8, p. 625.
- ⁱⁱⁱ John 10: 1-10.
- ^{iv} John 10:11.
- ^v Interpreter's Dictionary of the Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1962), p. 315.
- ^{vi} E.g., Isaiah 7: 21-22.
- ^{vii} E.g., Leviticus 13: 47-48; Job 31:20; Ezekiel 34:3.
- ^{viii} New Interpreter's Bible (Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1995), Vol. IX, p. 671.
- ^{ix} Ibid., Vol. IV, p. 767.
- ^x Psalm 23:3.
- ^{xi} See Scotty McLennan, Finding Your Religion: When the Faith You Grew Up With Has Lost Its Meaning (HarperSanFrancisco, 1999), pp. 9-12.