

Life With Abundance

John 10:1-10

Richard C. Allen

May 11, 2014

South Glastonbury

Connecticut

Of the four Gospel writers, John is known as the theologian, the one who places the emphasis on finding the deeper truths. John is writing for a church that desperately hungers for answers to questions about finding the meaning of life and what specifically Jesus Christ revealed of life's purpose.

In the passage for today, John uses shepherd language to address this question. And I would submit that it is the punch line, verse 10, that gets to the heart of the matter. "I have come that they might have life with abundance."

Life with abundance: that is the theme on this Sunday for honoring the Christian home.

Homes can be painful places, places of scarcity. But they can also be places of abundance, certainly places of spiritual abundance. Loretta Lynn reminds us of that in her famous country song, "The Coalminer's Daughter." In her Butcher Holler home, they didn't have much in terms of material abundance, but her song sings, "We were poor but we had love that's the one thing that daddy made sure of."

My brother, Billy and I have been reflecting together on the life of our sister Debbie who died in 2001. From all material calculations, her life would be measured in shortages. Barely a month went by when she didn't need a \$5 loan from one of her five brothers to make ends meet. But she became famous for her affectionate postcards. She'd write a short message and then the address.

Then, she'd start drawing circles and x's, hugs and kisses, across the bottom of the postcard, then continue the O's and x's up the side and across the top and then over onto the front side. She got more hugs and kisses onto a postcard than one would think is humanly possible. Her postcards were an outer sign of an inner abundance.

Loretta Lynn and Debbie Allen understood what Jesus was talking about that day with his disciples. "I came that they might have life with abundance." This is the first mark of a Christian home, a place where the well of love never runs dry.

On Sundays when we have a baptism, I usually remember to charge the parents to let their home be a place where forgiveness is real, where forgiveness is not withheld as a bargaining tool, but where it is offered as a free gift, an unmerited grace. A Christian home is one where forgiveness abounds.

I don't know too much about sheep, but I am guessing Jesus knew a lot about sheep and shepherds. I am guessing sheep have a way of wondering outside the pasture, falling into crevasses, and getting tangled up in briar bushes. They may have been told not to wonder off, but sheep quickly forget things like rules of the house. That's why they need a shepherd, preferably a good shepherd! A good shepherd is one who gathers the lost sheep and welcomes them home. The welcome includes an expression of forgiveness and not of judgment. I picture the good shepherd pouring soothing ointment on their wounds, whispering in their ears, assuring them of their value.

This is a good image for the Christian home. Every home needs a good shepherd. Sometimes it's mom. Sometimes it's dad. Sometimes it's older sister. Sometimes it's Gramma.

Somewhere in the Christian home there needs to be a forgiving soul, someone whose work it is to embrace the one who is struggling, and to welcome that one home; granting forgiveness and holding no grudges. Who is that person in your family? If you know who it is, go and thank that person! He or she is transforming your home into a Christian home. Where there is forgiveness, there is the abundance of life Jesus had in mind.

In our family of five boys and one girl, I'm sure it was our mother who meted out the forgiveness. She hints at this in her poem:

“I like my pumpkin
Tarts
And mince meat ones
As well.
I put them on the
Shelf last night
But not for show and tell.

Then – when our thankful
Dinner passed
And to my shelf I go
To my surprise
The tarts are gone
To where – I'll never
Know.

It could have been
The children
It could have been
Grandpa
It could have been
Aunt Debbie
It probably was
Them all!”

Her poem leaves me feeling her forgiveness.

“I came that they might have life with abundance.”

I’m sure that none of the families gathered here today ever have arguments. But they did have arguments in Jesus’ family of disciples. One day he caught them arguing over which one of them was the greatest. Each disciple had claimed that distinction!

So, Jesus sat them all down to end the arguing by explaining to them who is the greatest in God’s kingdom. He scooped up a child into his arms and held the child up high. Then he said, “Unless you turn and become like this child, you’ll not enter the kingdom,” or another translation, ‘you’ll not experience the abundance of life I have in mind.’

Abundance of life has much to do with being child-like. Child-like is not the same as child-ish. For a home to be a Christian home, there needs to be permission for being playful, for being trusting, for being imaginative, for being child-like.

As Jesus introduced the sheep and shepherd imagery, I picture him taking great delight in watching the lambs romp around the pasture discovering their environment, leaping and kicking up their heels, the epitome of joy! I’ve watched lambs do this. They seem to be playing a game of tag or hide and seek or kick the can. You can’t watch lambs at play without noticing the abundance of their energy.

A Christian home is one where it’s okay to be a lamb regardless of your age; where it’s more than okay, where it’s encouraged! On my key ring, I have a key that opens the back door of my house, a key that starts my Toyota pickup truck, a key that lets me into this building. Then, I have a mystery key.

It's the one that opens the door to my inner-child, to the playful part of myself, the part that allows me to tap into the abundance of life Jesus intended. I used this key recently on the Confirmation retreat. I watched the students out the window of the retreat center during one of our many breaks. They were playing soccer and taking turns being the goalkeeper. They were having so much fun! They were laughing and giggling. So, I ran outside, onto the pitch, and into the goal. I took my turn being goalie. I stopped not one of their shots. But I stopped them all in their tracks. They were stunned that the reverend was playing with them; being child-like. Oh, it's the one moment I remember from the whole weekend. If anyone captured that moment on film, I'd like to see it! I'd like to frame it. The caption would be, "Life with Abundance!"

On this Second Sunday of May, on Mother's Day weekend, we celebrate the Christian home as a place where love abounds, where forgiveness releases one from the oppressive weight of guilt, and where child-like imagination leads to sacred surprises.

I don't know about you, but I am in the greatest of hope! Amen!