

Fourth Sunday of Easter  
May 15, 2011  
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*Scriptures: Acts 2:42-47, Psalm 23, 1 Peter 2:19-25, Luke 24:13-35*

### **Abundant Life**

“I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” I wonder what Jesus meant by that. What did it mean then when he was preaching and teaching to his disciples? It seems to be a valid question since there was confusion; they did not understand what he meant. In fact the disciples once complained that Jesus would not speak to them plainly. He always spoke in parables (Mt. 13:34) and they sometimes couldn’t get the meaning of his words. By the same token we could also wonder what Jesus’ words mean to us here and now. We need to ask like the disciples did: What are you trying to say?

One way they teach us at seminary to try to answer this kind of question is by looking at different Bible translations. Here are a few examples. Bible in Basic English: “I have come so that they may have life and *have it in greater measure.*” NIV: “I have come that they may have life, and *have it to the full.*” God’s Word Translation: “But I came so that my sheep will have life and *so that they will have everything they need.*” NLV: “My purpose is to give them *a rich and satisfying life.*” You can see that, depending on what translation you are reading, you can understand one thing or the other. Some of these translations can be helpful; others can be confusing. Our interpretation of the text could also be dependent on what our situation is. It is often said that the Word of God is heard very differently depending on your socio-economic status. Again, what does Jesus mean when he says that he came so that we may have an abundant life?

What is the abundant life that Jesus promises to those who follow him? Does it mean to have enough to live? Does it mean to be able to send your children to private schools? Does it mean to be able to take a luxurious vacation every couple of years? These are not cynical questions. Many Christians do translate “abundant life” into the things they have. For better or for worse, it is what we learn from our American culture. What do they call it, keeping up with the Joneses? Even more so, they tell us that this is good for our economy. Wouldn’t you agree with me that it’s ironic that in times of economic troubles we are supposed to go to Wal-Mart to buy as much stuff as we can. That’s how we save the economy. It’s our American duty.

You know, I don’t necessarily have an issue with that. That’s not the question in front of us. The fact of the matter is that the least of us lives in relative abundance in comparison with much of the world population. And as we know, richness does not make us bad or sinful people. Again, that’s not the issue; our question is, what Jesus meant by “abundant life”?

To answer we could also take a look at the lives of others who have followed Jesus. Take for example the life of Dorothy Day, founder of the Catholic Worker movement. She was

a person who lived an abundant life, but not in the definition that we often think of. Here's what she writes in her autobiography:

*I wanted life and I wanted the abundant life. I wanted it for others too. I did not want just the few, the missionary-minded people like the Salvation Army, to be kind to the poor, as the poor. I wanted everyone to be kind. I wanted every home to be open to the lame, the halt and the blind, the way it had been after the San Francisco earthquake. Only then did people really live, really love their brothers. In such love was the abundant life and I did not have the slightest idea how to find it.*

Now, you may think of Dorothy Day was as radical, even an anarchist because she would not follow the normalcy of the time. But beyond her political ideas, she had the desire to live out the love of God. She learned to do that by living in community with others and she wanted others to learn to live in such a way. In fact, don't blame Dorothy for a radical interpretation of communal life. If anything at all, you could actually blame the Bible. If Dorothy is radical and an anarchist, what shall we say of the first Christian communities as they are described in the book of Acts? Today's reading from chapter two describes the first Christian communities as a pretty unconventional society. Nobody had any private property. Things were sold and the money distributed among all. That sounds like a pretty tough prescription to follow, don't you think?

But it doesn't have to be as radical as you think. It's all about forming community. It's all about being together. It's all about sharing, but not necessarily (or at least not limited to) the sharing of material things. It's about the sharing of the bread. The sharing of wine. The sharing of the Word, the Gospel, the Good News they are hearing for the first time. In essence it is the sharing of God. When those things are shared, when those things are passed over to each other, that's abundant life. This was a community, but not the "we are all a big family" kind of community. That kind of definition is often a superficial understanding of the community of believers. What we are talking about is a community bound together by their faith in God. When that happens, that's an abundant life.

Psalm 23 provides another answer to the question of what is an abundant life. "The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want." That sounds like abundance, doesn't it? When you have no wants it must mean that you have abundance of the things you need. And yet, there doesn't seem to be a whole lot of abundance in the psalm. There's the green pastures and the still waters, but not much of anything else. Because that's not the abundance the psalmist imagines. It's not about the material possessions but about relations. Abundant life is one lived in the presence of God. Whether you are in green pastures or in the darkest valley, you have no wants because God is present. God is present in times of material abundance and in times of scarcity. That's why we can "fear no evil, for you [God] are with me." The prepared table, the anointing with oil, the overflowing cup; those are signs of the presence of God in good and in not so good times. That's an abundant life as there's no need of anything else. To "dwell in the house of the Lord." That's the relationship that keep us in an abundant life.

There's a difference between desiring and needing. We can easily turn our desires into needing. Very often, my daughter Ariana would say, I need this or I need that. And she

can be pretty dramatic about what she perceives what her needs are. So what I try to do is to teach her that there's a difference between what she needs and what she wants. That's true not only for children, but for each one of us as well. We get too used to our comforts and think we can't live without them. But Christ's presence in our lives helps us to focus on what we truly need. If we are able to change our definition of a need and a want, we will have a different understanding of what is an abundant life. Let us be thankful to God for giving us an abundant life: A life where we have no wants because we have Christ. Amen.