

Abundance Reimagined – John 10:1-10 – May 7, 2017

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Following the healing of a man born blind, some of the Pharisees, the religious leaders, came over to Jesus to see what he was up to. He told them a parable about some sheep, a shepherd and a gate. Most of us don't know much about tending sheep in the first century, so it's helpful to know that after a full day of grazing, a shepherd would bring the flock of sheep back to the sheep fold to keep them safe from wild animals and from thieves during the night. All the shepherds in a particular area would bring their flocks to a common place of safety. In the morning, when it was time to go out again and graze, the shepherd would call to his sheep. The animals actually could distinguish his voice from other voices, so they followed him out into the grazing land. They would not follow after a stranger because they didn't recognize the voice.

Well, the religious were confused by this. They didn't quite get what Jesus meant when he gave them this image. They understood what shepherds were supposed to do, but what did that have to do with Jesus? So he tried another way. This time he referred to himself not as the shepherd, but as the gate for the sheep. Picture this. After bringing the sheep inside for the night, the shepherd actually lies down at the entrance of the sheepfold as a barrier between the flock and any potential danger. Basically, the idea is, if you want to get my sheep, you'll have to come through me first.

The sheepfold is a place of safety. Once inside you can let down your guard. It's comfortable. It's familiar. You're in there with your fellow sheep – you know your neighbors. And you know that the shepherd is watching your back. You can relax, unwind, and let your worries go. Turn off the internet with all its messages of gloom and doom and settle in for the night. Wouldn't it be wonderful if we could just hang out in the sheepfold? We wouldn't have to worry about anything. Life is good.

One problem. The sheep can't stay in the fold. Why does the shepherd take the sheep out in the morning? To find food. There is no pasture in the sheepfold. In order to live, the sheep must go out. Jesus says, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." To experience abundant life, the sheep can't just stay in. They must also go out. Not alone, but with their shepherd.

This last line from the John text is really the key to the whole passage. I got to thinking about that word "abundant" and what it means. What exactly does Jesus mean – when he says he brings abundant life

In the context of American consumerism, abundance is often linked to materialism. Abundance tends to refer to one's resources, one's lifestyle, and one's possessions. People refer to this as living the good life. To have all the glitter and glamour money can buy, even at the expense of others losing their access to basic resources like affordable health care for all or clean tap water in Flint. Is this what Jesus is referring to when he talks about his followers experiencing abundant life? That wealth and prosperity is the answer to all our troubles. Some might like to think so.

One of the CD's I keep in my car while traveling is from the BeeGees. I remember growing up in the late 70's when the youngest Gibb brother was a star, and like many young people at that time, I was infatuated with the Australian pop star. Andy Gibb had it all. Good looks, great talent, a family who supported him, fame, fortune and a promising future. He tragically died just days after his 30th birthday. Family and friends remarked that despite living what appeared to be the dream life, Andy was consumed with feelings of

inadequacy and emptiness. The fame and wealth couldn't give him what he needed and lacked, so he turned to alcohol and drugs. He died from heart failure related to his cocaine use. Hollywood is full of examples like this. https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Andy_Gibb

Fame, success, and fortune are not what Jesus is referring to when he speaks of sheep having abundant life through him. Abundant life is a life in which a person experiences wholeness or fullness in one's being. Where we discover and live out the purpose for which we were created.

Let's jump back for a moment to the story about the man born blind that Jesus healed. Why were the Pharisees angry with Jesus? For one, he healed the man on the Sabbath – he broke the Jewish law. But they also didn't like Jesus because he didn't fit the image of what a rabbi should be. He was unorthodox, and in their eyes, he was confusing and leading the people astray.

The consequence for the man born blind whom Jesus healed was that he was thrown out of the synagogue. This was a big deal. For him, the synagogue was his family of faith. It was his safe place. As a blind man, he had relied on the compassion of others to survive. But now he was out, and the doors were shut behind him. The gate was closed to the sheepfold. His community, his source of comfort, was stripped from him.

Then Jesus comes on the scene calling himself The Gate. But he is the Open Gate – where his sheep can not only come in but also go out to find pasture. He is the gate to abundant life. Through Jesus, the gate is open to life, to community, to purpose and to healing. He is not a gate that is closed to those who don't fit the mold. To those who live on the margin, to those who don't quite measure up.

Jesus is the gate that is open to all who want to come in. And once in, the gate is still open, going both in and out. I get the image in my mind of a revolving door. Folks going in and out. There is more to abundant life than simply a place of refuge. Inside is a place of safety and respite – a place for sheep to feel secure. But the open gate leads us into the world, because that is where we find the shepherd at work.

Inside we find community. We share in Christ's table, we worship together, we learn and grow in our faith. Inside we gain the strength to be able to go out into the world, to serve God and to work with all people. We follow the shepherd as he goes about bringing abundant life to all who are rejected and marginalized and without hope. Where others have experienced only closed doors, in Christ they find a God that offers abundant life.

Now when I think of the passage from John about abundant life, I see something way beyond what we might expect when hearing the word abundant. I think of a life of fullness, a life completely in Christ. In Jesus we find the gate to this life – a life of freedom, of healing and wholeness, of knowing that we can trust in the One who is always faithful. No matter what our circumstances, no matter where life may take us, in Christ we enter into abundant life where God awaits with open arms.

But this abundant life also takes us outside into the world, to share in Christ's work of service and hospitality, generosity and kindness. Abundant life is found in people sharing with one other, both goods and services. In a community striving for peace and reconciliation. It seeks to break down walls and boundaries that divide us, it is the end of fear and prejudice. Abundant life means bringing good news to the poor and in giving hope to the hopeless and in welcoming all inside.

Let us seek this abundant life that Christ offers, not only in finding refuge and comfort within what is familiar and safe. But let us also join our shepherd out in the world finding this abundant life as we join with him in his ministry and mission.