

Abundance

(Jn 10:11-18)

The verse that leads immediately into today's gospel lesson has Jesus saying:

"I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. "

And from there, Jesus begins to tell us what the abundant life looks like for those willing to follow him.

Sometimes, the abundant life looks like courage, as in laying down our lives for one another.

Other times, it looks like a circus, when God's funny bone turns our good common sense on its head.

Sometimes it looks like forgetting yourself, and other times it means being tough as nails!

More on that in just a moment.

But first, just ask yourself, when **you** think of abundance, what do **you** think about?

For me what comes to mind immediately are things like money in the bank, a full refrigerator, maybe a fat retirement account.

Don't be too hard on me!

That kind of abundance is sold to us every day in newspapers, on TV and even by those mindless ministers who hawk the so-called prosperity gospel, as in:

"God wants **you** to be rich!

It's the air that we breathe, the ocean we swim in everyday.

After all, Madison Avenue is brilliant.

They know that human beings walk around with emotional, spiritual, holes; holes that need to be filled; holes that long to be filled.

These holes are part of who we are, and are meant to be filled with the Holy Spirit, with the spirit of God, because these holes are the places where God touches us; where our deepest aspirations are fulfilled; where truth comes to rest within us.

But we are a fallen people.

And fallen people often look for the softer, easier way, something less demanding to fill the hole: and we Americans, well, we love to fill the hole with stuff.

Which of course satisfies, but only for a little while.

So we try more stuff.

Which, again, doesn't satisfy for long.

If gold and silver or a new Apple watch won't do it, what will?

That's the question our reading from Acts sets out to answer.

It's the story we've been following these last weeks about Peter; a story that ought to be entitled "No Good Deed Goes Unpunished. "

Last week's reading picks up right after Peter is accosted by a paralyzed panhandler, asking for a buck for lunch.

Peter responds that he's got neither silver nor gold, nor an Apple Watch for that matter, but he has something better; and invoking with full confidence the name of Jesus, helps the no longer paralyzed man to his feet, where he starts dancing in the street!

Not surprisingly, this completely freaks out the religious big shots, who demand to know, (and I quote the literal Greek translation), how a couple of "illiterate idiots" could possibly work such a miracle?!

So, no good deed goes unpunished, and Peter and his pals are promptly arrested and called before "THE IMPORTANT PEOPLE."

The IMPORTANT PEOPLE cannot believe that the market they had cornered - is now the territory of what seem to them to be nothing more than "illiterate idiots."

Peter, however, is just getting warmed up.

The formerly mystified and frightened disciple, now filled with the Holy Spirit, lets loose.

"This man," Peter points to the still dancing - once paralyzed man - "is standing before you in good health by the name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead."

Peter is pointing to the very nature of God's abundance: God's abundance looks like ---- healing, it looks like ---- life.

Look inside.

Look around.

What do we need more than anything?

And yet, when it comes to our faith in whether God can or will heal; in whether or not God can pull life out of all the death that surrounds us every day; most of us are practical atheists: we just don't believe that God can or will.

So today, in the middle of our Easter season, we, the Body of Christ, come face to face with Jesus, the Good Shepherd, and find him gently tugging on our collective elbow, saying:

"Believe it!"

The healing, the life, that is God's abundance begins with recognizing our brokenness.

Things can't be fixed unless you see they need fixing.

And that's what Peter's getting at when he tells the rulers who just aren't getting it, that there's only one place to look:

"There is salvation in no one else," Peter explains, "for there is no other name under heaven ... by which we must be saved."

This isn't a "we're right" and "you're wrong" kind of claim.

That's not what Peter's getting at.

Peter's not somehow condemning Buddhists or Hindus or Muslims.

Muslims had yet to exist and Peter probably never heard of a Buddhist or a Hindu.

He's not beating the drums of Christian one-ups-man-ship: he's a Jew talking to fellow Jews.

Instead, I think perhaps what Peter is getting at is that in Jesus, we get the very clearest glimpse into the truth of what is Really Real, which is simply another word for God.

And the truth of what is Really Real is that life is stronger than death, and that nothing, absolutely nothing, not heights nor depths not angels nor principalities not psychosis nor addiction nor narcissism nor self hate — not sin — nothing, can separate us from the love of God — the love poured out on all humanity through the life, death and resurrection of Jesus Christ.

That in a world where disease and death seem to call all the shots, to always have the upper hand, Peter proclaims "the grand reversal of the resurrection" - the condemned loser - the one they laughed at as he hung in agony on the cross - the one they thought they had disposed of -- this rejected stone is now the cornerstone - "this is the power of making broken lives whole."

"The name of Jesus" is not a magical incantation nor is it a slogan for intolerance of other religious paths.

It is the Way.

The Way of humility and self-giving, the Way that rejects pushiness and power.

It is the Way of laying down one's life for others, of taking up the cross, of following Jesus." "The Most Misused Scripture in the World," "Good, Life-giving Shepherd of Many Pastures," D Mark Davis, 4/23/12. (paraphrased).

It is the Way, in other words, of love.

Don't get me wrong.

It's not love as sugary sentiment or gooey weak-kneed affection.

That's not the love Jesus invites us into.

The love of Jesus is tough, seemingly crazy, constantly trying, patiently waiting and always ready to pay the consequences.

Saint John tells us plainly: that's what it means to be the good shepherd who dies for the flock; that's what it means for his followers to walk the talk: we don't just pray for the hungry, we feed them; we don't just feel bad for the naked, we clothe them.

It's the hard love of the parent of an addict who lets the child hit bottom, lets the child suffer the consequences of addiction, refusing to lessen the blows, since only in that great effort of parental self-sacrifice can the addict experience the pain that becomes the rope he may finally use to climb out of addiction.

It's the patient love of brothers and sisters who care for aging siblings; and children caring for aging parents; a patience that gradually accepts the profound role reversals such care brings; that gradually accepts the loss unfolding before one's eyes.

And it's the crazy love of opening churches and borders and communities to all kinds of strangers and wayfarers, and seeing what might happen next!

In all these ways, in all the varieties of love that each situation requires, we lay down our lives for one another; and in that laying down, discover, sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly, the abundant life that Jesus promises to each and every one of us.

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