

The Fourth Sunday on Easter
May 7, 2017
John 10:1-10

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The Door to Life Abundant

Grace to you and peace from our loving God, and from our Lord and Savior Jesus Christ. Amen.

Maybe some of you have noticed that I now end my sermons with “May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord unto abundant life.” I used to say “unto eternal life.”

So, why the change? Because I believe that God wants us to live abundantly in this life and not only think of or hope for the life with God that follows our death. The warrant for this comes from the lips of our Lord today in a sentence that rivals the simplicity and summarizing power of John 3:16. It is John 10:10: “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

I love these words of our Lord. And I love the truth and comfort, challenge and gift that they convey. And Jesus adds to the force of that call to abundant life with a metaphor:

So again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep... Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture...I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” (vv. 7, 9-10)

In order to understand this metaphor, it’s helpful to know that there were likely two kinds of sheepfold in that day. In the villages and towns themselves, there were communal sheepfolds where all the sheep were sheltered when they returned home at night. These folks were protected by a strong door, and only the guardian of the door had the key. When it was time to leave, the shepherds would call from outside the fold, and each sheep, knowing the master’s voice, would come to him. When they were out on the hills in the warm season, they didn’t return to the village, but were kept in sheepfolds on the hillsides.

An author speaks of her travels with a friend in Israel (Eva Watts, “The Life of Faith”):

“We reached a high ridge overlooking the village of Bethlehem. there we found a sheepfold, and went right in to inspect. It was not long before the owner appeared—a veteran, like Moses, with a long beard.

“This is your sheepfold?’ my friend asked. “Aye.”

“And is this where the sheep sleep?’ pointing to a rough shelter thrown up against the rock in a corner. He nodded.

“But you’ve no gate to the fold; how do you close them up at night?’

“The old man looked at us as if we ought to have known better. ‘I am the door.’ he said with emphasis; and, gathering his loose robe tight about his ankles, he was down in a moment, squatting in the doorway, back against one post, feet against the other, his knees drawn up and clasped by his weather-beaten old hands. Gently he bowed his head and closed his eyes, as many a time he had closed them to catch a few hours’ sleep under the starlight. ‘I am the door,’ he repeated. ‘I keep watch here at night. If thieves or wild beasts attempt to enter, they have to tackle me first. I have never lost a lamb from the fold yet.’”

Jesus is the door—the door to abundant life.

You may remember the rock concert several years ago in Cincinnati. It has become infamous, not for the rock but for the doors. They only opened outwards, which makes sense for folks trying to get out. But not for those trying to get in. Since there were no assigned seats, and everything was first-come, first-served, there was a huge press to get in early. Hundreds of teenagers gathered, pressed, and waited anxiously to find a place near the stage.

About an hour before the security people were to open the doors, band members took their places on stage and began to tune their instruments. As they warmed up, they started enjoying themselves and began to play parts of their songs. The many young folks and adults in the back of the line continued to press forward against those in front. And they couldn’t move because the doors weren’t yet open. The security detail couldn’t find a way to help. With everyone jammed against the doors, they couldn’t be opened, since they opened outward. Sixteen people lost their lives.

Some doors only open inwardly. The famous picture of Christ standing at the door and knocking is interesting because there’s no handle on that door. Only from inside can it be opened, and then only to swing inward—to invite the Lord into our lives. He will not force his way in.

Jesus is the door to abundant life. All that’s required is that we open the door and let him in. I should probably add here that Luther might not like this approach to the metaphor. He taught that even the will to let Christ in was a gift of God. He was exceedingly careful not to teach anything that suggested even a touch of works righteousness. Still, I hope you hear the importance here of a response to Christ’s persistent love, regardless of from where that response arises. Our Lord stands, not guarding, but working in every possible way to be an open gate into abundant living.

I recall an encounter with a parishioner. She came to me and very much wanted to talk. We spoke about her life-long struggles briefly, and then she said that she

wanted to know something. She described a friend of hers and a terrible sin that friend had committed. She wondered if her friend could ever be forgiven for the sin, and I said, “Of course.” God does not withhold forgiveness, and especially not from those who are truly repentant, who seek forgiveness, and who wish to amend their lives.

She then confessed that she too had committed the same sin (or maybe she felt that she could then reveal that it was she all along that prompted the question). She asked me to reaffirm that she could be forgiven. I told her that she could be assured of forgiveness if she were repentant and I said a few things about the importance of intending not to sin again. I also cautioned her that many times people have more trouble forgiving themselves than they do accepting God’s forgiveness. And that it is important to live a life freed from the guilt that can keep us from moving forward and getting on with our lives.

Her response was wonderful. She said, “Of course. That would put me above God.”

That was a powerful thing to say, filled with a right attitude toward God. You see, she understood that to accept God’s forgiveness and not forgive herself placed her judgment above that of God. And it reveals something of life abundant—this life in which sin has no power over us. It is the resurrected life available to all of us, marked especially in these weeks of Easter.

I see similar themes in the media regularly and thankfully. One series episode depicts a priest who is on trial for withholding absolution from a woman who had used methods of birth control unacceptable to the Roman Church. The woman was so devout that the withholding of absolution had totally incapacitated her. She couldn’t relate to her husband or her children any longer, feeling that their being near her would contaminate them with her sin. She knew without doubt that, having committed a mortal sin without being absolved, she would be damned to an eternity in hell.

The priest was convinced that the woman was not truly repentant, since she seemed intent on continuing the practice which her church condemned; and the rules of canon law, he thought, forbid offering absolution under those circumstances.

Finally, the jury convicted the priest of negligence in his counseling, judging that he knew the woman well enough to expect the severe emotional consequences of his decision to withhold absolution. The jury awarded the husband a sum of \$250,000.

The, following the verdict, the man told the priest that he didn’t want his money. He only wanted his wife returned to him. The lawyer finally convinced the priest that the woman was indeed repentant. The scene ended with the woman kneeling at the feet of the priest as he pronounced the words of absolution.

That scene is admittedly foreign to the kind of understanding we Lutherans have of the faith. Still, I saw in the face of that woman as she knelt at the feet of the priest an

expression that displayed returning life—abundant life—life that is not bound by guilt or judgment or fear of death.

Jesus is the door to abundant life. All that is needed is an opening of self to let him in.

Sin has a way of keeping us from abundant life—not only sin that lays heavily upon us but also sin that is insidious.

Surely I don't need to add here that a life of abundance is not necessarily an abundant life. And yet, greed is so pervasive that perhaps I do.

The story of a well-known public figure—and many others—tells the tale:

All he ever really wanted in life was more. He wanted more money, so he parlayed inherited wealth into a billion-dollar pile of assets. He wanted more fame, so he broke into the Hollywood scene and soon became a film-maker and star. He wanted more sensual pleasures, so he paid handsome sums to indulge his urges. He wanted more thrills, so he designed, built, and piloted the fastest aircraft in the world. He wanted more power, so he secretly dealt political favors so skillfully that two U.S. presidents became his pawns. All he ever wanted was more. He was absolutely convinced that more would bring him true satisfaction. History shows otherwise.

This man concluded his life emaciated and colorless; with a sunken chest, fingernails in grotesque, inches-long corkscrews; rotting, black teeth; tumors; and innumerable needle marks from his drug addiction. "Howard Hughes died, believing the myth of more. He died a billionaire junkie, insane by all reasonable standards."

Abundant life has very little to do with an abundance of things. It has everything to do with a heart that is free of guilt and that knows God's acceptance, grace, and forgiveness.

Jesus is the door to abundant life. May our hearts and our lives open to him. Amen.

May the peace of God, which passes all understanding, keep our hearts and minds through faith in Christ Jesus our Lord unto abundant life. Amen.