

Why Settle for Less?

A sermon by the Very Reverend Timothy Jones
preached at Keenan Chapel
The Fourth Sunday of Easter / May 12, 2019
Psalm 23 / John 10:22-30

A writer for the New York Times magazine recently wrote about how some of America's most well-to-do professionals are deeply unhappy. I loved the response of a reader who wrote a letter to the editor.

“This [article] really hit home,” she wrote.

“My husband (my late husband, I might add) graduated from law school way back when.

He worked a ... 9-to-5 job and was happy with his lot in life. I, on the other hand, used to pine over a bigger house in a bit better part of town.

He just used to smile and nod.

Well, it never happened, and unfortunately, he died unexpectedly at age 42;

our kids were 8, 10, and 12.

It has been 20 years, and I tell people that the reason my kids are all O.K. and doing well is because the time they had with him was the best.

They were his priority,
not his computer or his phone.

He was never the guy on the bleachers working;
he was the guy standing on the field
encouraging and cheering.

Life is short, [she concluded,] and it's also true
that when you die, no one is going to care about
that extra percentage point of return.

--Name withheld

NY Times Magazine, March 10, 2019, p. 10

Well, that man, though he died young,
really did live.

What about us?

How do we keep our souls from too quickly
getting satisfied with things that attract us at first
but won't ultimately satisfy?

I like the line of the comedienne who said,
"I've always wanted to be somebody,
but I see now I should have been more specific."
Today helps us get specific about why we are here
on this earth.

I want to suggest today that there's a different way to live: Not just contenting ourselves with the so-called good life. A life that's not just full of stuff, but abundant.

Why settle for less?

We all hear hints, if we listen, that let us know we don't have to stop with a merely "good" life of material comforts.

Not when we can enjoy an abundant life, and a life that endures through every circumstance, even the hard ones.

Certainly the Bible helps us with what matters, with discovering more depth in life.

In the Bible, the word *life* can refer, of course, to physical life—to the biology of plants, animals, and people.

But not all the time, not by any means.

The word *life* also points to more than just existing. The word has to do with a quality that has something real to it, something vibrant. Life in this sense means depth and direction, not just skirting the surface or ambling along.

It has to do with something good, namely physical life, but also something great—with a life guided and made rich by God himself, by Christ himself.

So I'll say it again: Why settle for less?

Jesus in our reading today spoke of life.

He spoke of life in all kinds of ways.

Elsewhere in John he says, "I have come that they might have life and ... have it more abundantly."

And in today's reading, he said,

"I give [my followers] eternal life."

Now, that word *eternal* is likely to make you think only of the life after this earthly life.

A heavenly life when we die. That's fine.

That's very important.

But even when John the Gospel writer speaks of eternal life, he has in mind a life that begins here and now.

Today we observe Good Shepherd Sunday. Our collect at the beginning of the service referred to "Jesus as the good shepherd of your people."

Back when the sacred authors of the Bible used the imagery of the shepherd for Jesus, they knew the shepherd as someone who stayed with his sheep at all costs, guiding, protecting, and walking with them through the valleys and hills. A shepherd protected their lives from dangers. The shepherd poured his life into the life and survival of his flock. He helped them, tended them, made them flourish.

In this passage from John's Gospel, Jesus says to those who demanded to know if he really was the world's savior, a true shepherd,

they need only look at what he does.

They simply observe how he acts,
the great kindness and strength, the way he adds
life to every situation.

Even the dangerous ones.

A good shepherd led his flock to pools of water
where thirst is quenched and they can thrive.

He not only rescued them from danger, he
provided for them all they need for a full life.

Who Jesus is, then, what we believe about him,
isn't just a line in a list of beliefs to check off.

The sheep know and trust the shepherd, not
because they have reasoned their way there
through philosophy courses,
not through lofty study, but because they have
experienced the shepherd and
his everyday kindness.

Abundant life, because he is here, is something
we discover as we walk with him and after him.

It's like a child who knows and trusts his or her mother, or father, or grandparent, because of experiences with that person.

It's that vivid and real.

The Bible tells us that Jesus is a good shepherd who so loves and cares for us that he gives us life, gives us his own life, lays it down for us.

We experience this life-giving tending in the sometimes rocky paths we walk, with the sometimes gritty choices we face.

We discover it amid our real longings and hopes, our very human fears and daily anxieties.

Even when we face death, we hear Jesus say, "no one will snatch [my sheep] out of my hand," out of the Father's hand.

I'm told that if sheep grow anxious about something, they will stand. And stand.

They won't lie down. That's the way they deal with their nervousness in face of a threat.

Sometimes, we resist lying down, too.
We bear down and speed up when we should slow
down and get quiet.

But a good shepherd, a strong, great shepherd,
makes the sheep to lie down. *He makes me lie
down in green pastures*, we say in the best known
of all the Psalms, Psalm 23, the psalm of the
shepherd.

We hear the voice of the shepherd—quietly,
usually, often as a dawning reassurance.
Perhaps it comes through the voice of a friend.
Through a quiet moment in worship
or during prayer.

Isn't that what we long to hear?

“My sheep hear my voice,” Jesus says of those
who experience abundant life he offers.
Don't we long for those words a caring shepherd
can tell us?

Maybe life for you means low expectations.
broken relationships or addictive behaviors,
or fearful nights, or depressing days.

Or your relationship with God or the church that
has seemed routine, flat.

Maybe your life is more characterized by blah
than awe.

What if more is possible?

He stretches out a protecting hand and guides us.

Why wouldn't we reach out for it?

Why settle for less?