

May 3rd, 2020

John 10:1-10 “Abundant Life”

Last week I talked about the shift that we’re experiencing. In this shift, we are witnessing the collapse of some of the powers and principalities of the World’s Kingdoms and the emergence of an era where we can bear witness to the unfolding of God’s Kingdom. It’s nothing new. It’s been happening for a long time. And I suppose we’ve seen cycles of this shift throughout history. Jesus said that the Kingdom of God is like a mustard seed or yeast in the bread dough. It starts out small, but then it slowly infiltrates as it grows and then BOOM ... the Kingdom of God is what’s left. So many people want to put on a sandwich board sign, go out and shout, “The End Is Near!” Okay, but I like the way Jesus framed it. “The Kingdom of God is at hand.” So close. It’s like you can *just* reach it. It’s not far away at all.

Speaking about the way Jesus frames things, we’ve got a great passage in front of us this morning. I’ve said it a lot over the past few months, but it was definitely a “God Thing” that we’ve been in John’s gospel over the course of Lent and Eastertide. I’m a fan of Mark’s gospel as many of you know because it’s a bare-bones “Intro to Jesus” gospel. This is his life. This is his ministry. Let’s go do likewise. John is this cosmic, cryptic, metaphysical mess that just doesn’t always make sense to a guy who is all about “get ‘er done.” So studying the John writings in the New Testament has been a challenge for me. And yet, these writings are timely because the message is so applicable to the multiple crises we’ve experienced lately.

COVID-19 has given me some time to think, time to breathe, and time to get in touch with why I even do vocational ministry. It’s funny how in the “old normal,” prior to the Shelter-In-Place Order, I spent a lot of time running around burning the candle at both ends, constantly working harder thinking that doing so was the only thing that justified my existence. And yet I was constantly thinking, “I don’t have time to do it all! I’m failing at ministry because I can’t do enough ... I can’t get it all

done!” I received a meme last Spring called “8 Signs You’re Burned Out.” The list went like this – 1. You’re not taking care of your basic needs. 2. Your “To-Do” list is overwhelming. 3. Your life doesn’t motivate you. 4. You’re not having a break. 5. You’re getting overly irritated with people. 6. You’re living on auto-pilot. 7. Your thoughts are negative. 8. You’re snoozing your alarm too much. I had the audacity to think, “Well this doesn’t apply to me because I don’t hit the snooze on my alarm.” And yet now, during this quiet time with less activity, I’ve had time to learn how to make plants grow. I have time to treat my body gently with yoga instead of beating myself up with CrossFit. I’ve had time to pray and meditate meaningfully and purposefully. And I’ve had time to read. And boy howdy the books I’ve read have been game changers.

The first book I read is by and about Rev. Dr. William Barber, one of our Disciples Ministers from a small church in South Carolina. The book is called, *The Third Reconstruction: How a Moral Movement is Overcoming the Politics of Division and Fear*. The second book is, *Christ in Crisis? Why We Need to Reclaim Jesus* by Jim Wallis, an evangelical minister whose rise to prominence has been due to his calling to be the moral conscience of the evangelical movement. What these two books have in common is how Christians need to return to Jesus. “What do you mean? We’re Christians! We’re all about Jesus!” Well ... according to both these authors, we have lost touch with the heart of Jesus’ ministry and teaching. Wallis and Barber are both what I call “red letter” Christians. In case you don’t know what that means, lot of Bibles are printed with the words of Jesus in red letters. So to be a “red letter Christian” is one who holds Jesus’ words as the highest authority in our scriptures. Both authors say that the church needs a reset in their thinking, and to do this, we need to start with the words of Jesus. So over the next several weeks, we’re going to take a look at some “Jesus values” that the church has lost touch with, and remind ourselves that these are based on things that Jesus actually said.

ONE OF THE FIRST JESUS VALUES THAT WE NEED TO RE-CLAIM IN THE CHURCH IS THE PRACTICE OF INCLUSIVITY

Good grief Jesse, don't we talk about that enough already? "All means all?" We've got it plastered all over the place. You get us to say it all the time in worship. Yeah. And I've been meaning to re-visit and address this for a while. Back in late fall, I placed a question mark after the words "All Means All" in the marquee just to see if anyone noticed. One person did and asked why. And I said, "That's a sermon for another day." And then I got caught up in a bunch of other nuts and bolts church things, and I started doubting and second guessing myself and asking myself, "Is that the cross you really want to be crucified on? We're stable. Can you really afford to rock the boat and jeopardize your security?" That, of course, was before the COVID-19 crisis which, in my estimation, is the big flashing neon indicator light that it's crunch time for the church to step up and be ready to receive this emerging Kindom of God.

So here we are in John, addressing one of his "I am" statements. In this passage, Jesus says, "I am the Good Shepherd." But he also says, "I am the Gate." So is Jesus the shepherd, or is Jesus the gate? Or is he the gate *and* the shepherd? We could spend way too much time on that, so I want to just focus on "I am the Good Shepherd" simply because we tend to use this passage as a justification to separate when in fact, we need to come together, and that's what this passage is about. Really? I always thought it about dividing the sheep into groups. Nope. Think about this - There is no distinction made here between "good sheep" and "bad sheep." The only distinction that's made is between the sheep and the shepherd. John highlights that precious relationship and how the safety and security that it represents provides the link in this relationship. So if we, as the church, who are called to be Jesus' hands and feet on the ground, or in this case the "shepherd on the ground," how can being in relationship with the church help, protect, and strengthen *all* of the sheep? It is *not* the church's job to be the gatekeepers of "who is in and who is out," although we sure act like we'd like this to be the case. This

isn't "separating the goats and the sheep," that's a different passage from a different gospel and a different context. The gate's function is to help keep the sheep together and to help keep them in relationship with each other and with the Shepherd.

But this is often misinterpreted as an "either or, in or out" passage in order to justify keeping us separate. How? In what way? You name it. How about by race? Martin Luther King Jr. used to say that Sunday morning at 11:00 is the most segregated hour in our nation. That was over 50 years ago, and unfortunately, it's still true. How about separation by economics? Let's face it, there are "status churches" out there where folks attend for no other reason that the church is where one is expected to go if one is a religious person with money and influence. Likewise, there are churches out there who identify as "blue collar" and wouldn't be very welcoming to an "uppity rich person." How about by sexual orientation? "That's the gay church." Or "That's the heck no, we don't welcome LGBTQ people ever, and we're proud of it!" How about by politics? A lot of churches are guilty of setting themselves apart by identifying with political right and left. As my friend Rev. Amy Piatt said once, "We want to divide ourselves into red and blue. What's wrong with purple? That's genuine inclusivity there."

Okay, here's one that's going to raise some eyebrows. How about by religion? Jesse, this passage is written by Christians to Christians? Yeah, we know you're involved with interfaith work, and we tolerate that up to a point, but how can we *not* be separate from other religious traditions. I'm not saying we have to all go to church together or worship together or anything like that! You're right. We are Christians. We hang our hats on the Jesus hat rack. But ... do we have to be so awful to those who are not? Can we not work together with other "sheep" to usher in the Kingdom of God? Does religion have to be what divides us to the point of going to war? "Yeah, but Jesse ... the Muslims want to kill us!" Please don't make me have to teach a history lesson where I make a list of religions whose purpose has been to eliminate another religion. We are on that list. "But that's not *us*!"

That's those *other* Christians who don't know any better. They aren't a fair representation of a *real* Christian!" Okay. Why can this not be true for other religions as well?

What this week's text is about is how one lives an abundant life. Not a separate life. .