

## FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER (A)

John 10:1-10  
May 15, 2011

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In the name of the Father, and of the + Son, and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.  
Alleluia! Christ is risen!

***He is risen indeed! Alleluia!***

At the close of today's Gospel, Jesus says that he has come so that his sheep — his followers, all of us — may have life and have it abundantly. Is he talking only about eternal life, or is he also talking about *this* life? I have no doubt that these words refer not only to the hope and promise of life in heaven, but also to our life here on earth.

There is an old Spanish legend that goes something like this: When people arrive at the gate of heaven seeking to enter, St. Peter asks them a strange question. He says to each one, *"Tell me this. Have you taken advantage of all the earthly joys which God, in his goodness, made available to you while you were on earth?"*

If a person replies, *"No, I haven't,"* St. Peter shakes his head sadly and says, *"I'm sorry friend, I can't let you in — not yet. How can you expect to be ready for the joys of heaven, if you haven't prepared yourself for them through the medium of earthly joys? I'll have to send you back to earth, until you learn better."*

It is probably true that the Christian faith has sometimes been too identified with restrictions and prohibitions. Through the years, some have no doubt been brought up on a theology of a kind of excessive detachment from the world. This present life was viewed as nothing more than a vale of tears, a time of trial. And that kind of piety discouraged legitimate, God-pleasing, enjoyment of life. It could lead to a kind of half-heartedness. It was almost as if it was sinful to enjoy anything too much — always living cautiously and fearfully.

But given the witness of our Lord and of the scriptures, it surely is possible to enjoy life to the fullest, while also being devout and faithful at the same time. The two are not mutually exclusive. In fact, the two go together, hand in glove.

The good shepherd wants us — wants you — to have life — ***abundant*** life. Life is God's gift to us. It is desirable. And how much more so then, is ***abundant*** life God's gift. The opportunity to not simply exist, but to ***thrive*** — the chance to not merely "slog on," but to ***flourish***. To have a sense of meaning, a sense of purpose, a sense of fulfillment. To know and be known. To love and be loved. If there is one thing that pretty much everyone desires — even if they can't name it — it is surely that: ***abundant life***. And when we're honest and think about it, the truth is we regularly make all kinds of sacrifices in the hope of earning, or achieving, or purchasing this abundant life. And that can lead into the wrong places. In the words of our Gospel, we can be led astray by someone or some thing, other than the true shepherd.

This reality became especially clear to me this past week in watching a portion of a PBS *Frontline* documentary, entitled “*The Persuaders.*” The program is all about the changing nature of advertising in our culture, and it gives evidence of how keenly we all seek a sense of fulfillment and purpose — or what we might call abundant life — and how all too often we go searching for it in the things we *buy*. The portion of the program I saw tracked the shift in advertising from making promises about brand quality, to making promises about quality of life — indeed, promising a certain kind of life, through buying certain products — cars, computers, shoes.

The advertising analysts talked about “emotional branding,” which they defined as making a company or product provide a “meaning system.” “Emotional branding’s” purpose is to fill in the empty places where non-commercial institutions like schools and churches might have once done the job. And so, companies and brands become more than just a mark of quality; they become an invitation to a longed-for lifestyle, a ready-made identity. Who are you? You’re a person who uses an *iphone*. You’re a person who runs in *Nikes*. You’re a person who drives a *Lexus*.

One of the persons interviewed, a Naomi Klein, the author of *No Logo*, observed that,

*When you listen to brand managers talk,  
you can get quite carried away in the idea  
that they are actually fulfilling these [human] needs  
that we have for community and narrative, and transcendence.*

*But in the end it is a lap-top [computer]  
and a pair of running shoes,  
and they might be great,  
but they’re not actually going to fulfill those needs.*

*Which [ultimately] serves [the companies] very well,  
because of course, that means  
that you have to go shopping again.*

So here we are, in our affluent, western society, all too often, seeking meaning and fulfillment — that is, we’re seeking abundant life — but we’re seeking it from *things* — things we *buy*, things we *consume* — because we’ve drifted away from genuine abundant life in the Body of Christ. What can be done to change that?

Well, we must be honest and consider how often we have been cheated — or perhaps better said — how often *we have cheated ourselves* — by settling for something less than genuine, abundant life. Consider the choices we make, the

strategies we use, the things we rely upon, to try and bring us authentic, abundant life. Are you satisfied?

I suspect that, after all of our *seeking* and *searching* and *shopping*, we still regularly end up far short of experiencing the abundant life our Lord Jesus promises. Perhaps one of the basic problems is the premise that we will somehow *achieve* this abundant life. Ultimately, it's not something we can achieve. It is rather, something we can only humbly *receive*.

Authentic abundant life — life which Jesus describes as flowing from relationship with him, and through him with God — this abundant life demands that we be more vulnerable than we're most often prepared to be. So much of our life is about protecting ourselves: giving the impression that we really do have it all together — the impression that we're self-sufficient — and in this way guarding ourselves against exposure.

The difficulty, is though, that we cannot experience abundant life without exposing ourselves, without lifting up those vulnerabilities we want to hide. Jesus has told us again and again, that it is in *letting go* of our lives, it is in *losing our lives in him* and *for him*, that's when we truly *receive* life — genuine, abundant life.

Do you want to experience that life? Then give yourself away, for Jesus' sake. Go and help someone, give of your time, lend a hand, for Christ's sake. Then you will know abundant life.

In the first volume of his work, *Jesus of Nazareth*, Pope Benedict XVI writes these words about today's Gospel:

*This is Jesus' great promise: to give life in abundance. Everyone wants life in abundance. But what is it? What does life consist in? Where do we find it?...*

*Jesus promises that he will show the sheep where to find "pasture" — something they can live on — and that he will truly lead them to the springs of life...*

*But what does all this mean?*

*We know what sheep live on, but what does man live on?*

*The [Church] Fathers saw...reference[s] to the mountain country of Israel and the shady and well-watered pastures on its uplands as an image of the heights of Holy Scripture, of the life-giving food of God's word...*

*the Fathers saw correctly*

*and...they understood Jesus himself correctly.*

*Man lives on truth and on being loved:*

*on being loved by the truth.  
He needs God, the God who draws close to him,  
interprets for him the meaning of life,  
and thus points him toward the path of life.*

*Of course man needs bread, he needs food for the body,  
but ultimately what he needs most is the Word, love,  
God himself.*

*Whoever gives him **that** gives him “life in abundance.”* (pp.278-9)

Into our situation of trying to **achieve** life, trying to **buy** life, God comes and embraces us in the incarnation, taking on our lot and our life in the flesh and blood of Jesus. The man born of woman, born under the law; the one who experienced love and laughter, sorrow and disappointment; the teacher of love and peace who was executed on the cross — this one knows the deepest recesses of our fears and insecurities, and he has embraced them all. And in his resurrection, he comes bearing the peace he has offered all along, accompanied with the promise that his love is greater than fear, and that his new life is greater than death.

Which means again, that abundant life is not something to earn or achieve. It's not something you can buy, or barter for. Rather, it is a **gift** — the sheer gift of our God who loves you enough to lay down his life for you.

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