

Pastor Roy's sermon from April 29, 2012

Grace and peace to you from God our father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

What is abundant life? Does it mean long life? Does it mean a more comfortable life?

Simply put, abundance is plenty...but plenty of what? We are tempted when we are bored, or sad, or searching for something just out of reach. . .to fill our emptiness with something—anything that distracts us so we can feel satisfaction. We eat or go shopping or drink or lose ourselves in a hobby or follow some other compulsive urge. Could it be that sometimes, instead, what we need is to get in touch with what we already have, and who we truly are? Do we need to acquire more of anything, or do we need to seek to be *satisfied and grateful* for the gifts all around and within us.

We have a problem. Our cultural obsession with things gets in the way of what we truly need and who we truly are. We are creatures in relationship. In the absence of healthy relationships, we start to substitute things to fill the void. What we need, I suggest, is to deepen our relationships with people, and the plants and animals and space of God's creation? I believe God is calling us to rediscover the joy of knowing and being known.

But how do we work on our many relationships? Again, I am not just talking about relationships with people. They are vital. But we relate or fail to relate healthily to everything around us, not just a handful of key people.

How do we work on relationships? [response] Isn't the first step awareness? Who and what is around us? Once we identify these, mustn't we open ourselves up to all who surround us—to connect with these others? How do we connect? We must listen. Listen to your spouse. Listen to your children. Listen to the critters around us. Listen to the rain. Listen to the trees. Sound strange? Perhaps we can learn to listen to family and neighbors by first listening to something that stills us deeply within. Remember, without the trees, there would never have been life on this planet. God has placed us all here to relate to one another, not so that we can protect ourselves from everything around us.

Relationships make us vulnerable. That's why we find solace in creation. It's generally safe, except for extreme situations. If we admit it, we are afraid of rejection. If we care, we might be taken advantage of, or we might not be appreciated.

But love takes chances. Love bridges the gap. Love covers the distance. Love realizes that everyone suffers and that sharing rather than hiding our suffering allows us to be drawn together. Love is strong. Love is like a muscle, the more we love, the stronger we and our love become. The more we love, the less fear drives us. Great love replaces the fear of scarcity with an awareness of abundance. The foundation of love is trust in God who gives life with abundance.

So abundance is not about stuff but about relationships. The lottery is powerless to teach us to trust in God's provision. The perfect investment will not teach me to take the time to listen to my neighbor. Our instinct to gather more around us does nothing for us. As Jesus revealed, life is so much more than eating and clothing and a roof over our heads.

Abundant life comes from abundant trust in a Good Shepherd God who walks with us always and does not abandon us. Abundant life is life hidden with God in Christ. Abundant life is not something we acquire, something new. Abundant life begins in baptism. God says, “You are my beloved child, and you are already enough. You are fine just the way you are. You are safe, because no one, no thing, no reality can pluck you out of my hand. You are mine. And that's a very good thing.

The resurrection of Jesus proves to us that nothing can take away this abundant life *which just is* because God has so created. We can love freely and without fear even as Jesus did.

I found a story which illustrates listening as the basis of relating to the world around us. . .It is a story about a woman who shares with a seat mate on a plane who is partially paralyzed and spills yogurt on himself but cannot clean it up. She is reminded as they share their similar stories of suffering that they have much in common. Abundant life is shared between them not based on similar strength but similar fears and weakness. The story reminds us that openness to one's neighbor who might be suffering much more than we realize can forge a relationship which reveals that joyful abundance is all around us. Abundance is revealed in relationship to one another and God's good creation. Don't hold back but let us embrace God's gift. [Kitchen Table Wisdom: Stories that Heal, Rachel Naomi Remen, M.D.

No wonder there is salvation in no one else. No wonder there is no other name but the name of the one who gives his life for his friends. For us. Herein is abundant life—knowing that God is my shepherd, Jesus is my shepherd, and not just *my* shepherd, but that he shepherds all peoples and all of creation. So let us learn to live with that as our foundation. The Shepherd God calls us to live in open relationship with our neighbor and all of creation. Freely receiving, freely giving. Healthy relationships cause love to grow. They make us stronger. They teach us what abundant life is. Sisters and brothers, let us love one another, for love is of God and everyone who loves knows God and gladly shares freely.

Amen.