

## Abundance

The verse that leads immediately into today's gospel lesson has Jesus saying: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

And from that teaching, Jesus goes on to talk about what that abundant life looks like for those willing to follow him.

Sometimes, the abundant life looks like courage.

Other times, it looks like a circus.

Sometimes it looks like forgetting yourself, and other times it means being tough as nails!

More on that in just a moment.

First, we need to size up abundance as Jesus gives it; and the American way of abundance.

It should come as no surprise that the two are miles apart.

Our neighbor down the street gives me a chuckle every time I walk Sammy around the block.

This neighbor is in his sixties, and in front of his house is a big, bright red double axel pick up truck, a huge yellow boat, a Cadillac Esplanade SUV, a sporty sports car with a big wing on the back, and two motorcycles.

His girlfriend is a very pretty gal twenty years his junior.

And I think: "Here's a man who loves his toys!"

Abundance, in America, looks like this fellow's life.

That kind of abundance is sold to us every day in print ads, on TV and even by some mindless ministers who hawk the so-called prosperity gospel (the one that says: "God wants you to be rich!").

It's the air that we breathe, the ocean we swim in everyday.

After all, Madison Avenue isn't stupid.

They learned early on that human beings, for the most part, walk around with holes inside; holes that *need* to be filled; holes that *long* to be filled.

These holes, of course, are part of who we are, and are meant to be filled with the Holy Spirit.

These holes are the places where God touches us; where our deepest aspirations can be fulfilled; where truth may come to rest within us.

But we are also a fallen people.

And fallen people often look for the softer, easier way, something less demanding to fill the hole: and Americans in particular love to fill the hole with stuff.

Which of course satisfies, but only for a little while.

So we try more stuff.

Which, again, doesn't satisfy for long.

If gold and silver won't do it, what will?

That's the question our reading from Acts sets out to answer.

It's the story we've been following these last weeks about Peter; a story that ought to be entitled "No Good Deed Goes Unpunished."

As you will recall, a few weeks ago, Peter is heading into church to pray when a paralyzed panhandler asks for a few bucks for lunch.

Peter responds that he's broke, but he has something better than lunch money (something better than gold and silver too); and invoking with full confidence the name of Jesus, helps the now formerly paralyzed man to his feet, where he starts dancing in the street!

Much like our friends at the Vatican, who only a few days ago silenced various Irish priests who want to debate issues like women's ordination and top down authority, so too the religious big shots in Peter's time are furious that, as it says in the original Greek, a couple of "illiterate idiots" would have the temerity to work such a miracle.

Peter and his pals are arrested and called to stand before "THE IMPORTANT PEOPLE."

These IMPORTANT PEOPLE cannot believe that what they thought they had the market on – is now being given out for free by, as I mentioned a moment ago, illiterate idiots.

Peter, however, is just getting warmed up.

The formerly mystified and frightened disciple, now filled with the Holy Spirit, gives them, figuratively speaking of course, both barrels.

"This man," Peter says, pointing to the still dancing – once paralyzed man – "is standing before you in good health by the

name of Jesus Christ of Nazareth, whom you crucified, whom God raised from the dead.”

Peter – whether he knows it or not -- is pointing to the very nature of God’s abundance: God’s abundance looks like ---- healing.

Look inside.

Look around.

What do we individually, and we collectively, need more than anything?

And yet, when it comes to our faith about whether God can or will heal; whether what needs to be healed is an illness or infirmity or our broken world; the fact is we are most of us practicing atheists: we too often just don’t believe that God can or will heal.

So today, in the middle of our Easter season, as we gather as the Body of Christ, Jesus, the Good Shepherd, gently tugs at our collective elbow, and says:

“Believe it!”

The healing that is God’s abundance begins with recognizing our brokenness.

Things can’t be fixed unless you see they need fixing.

And that’s what Peter’s getting at when he tells his brothers in Jerusalem, those rulers who just aren’t getting it, that there’s only one place to look:

"There is salvation in no one else," Peter explains, "for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved."

Now, this is an important line; one that's often been seized upon like a club to beat non-Christians over the head.

That's not what Peter's getting at.

Peter's not somehow condemning Buddhists or Hindus or Muslims.

Muslims had yet to exist and Peter probably never heard of a Buddhist or a Hindu.

He's not beating the drums of Christian one-ups-man-ship.

Too many modern Christians keep making that mistake and misuse Peter's words to suggest something he never intended.

What Peter is getting at when he tells the Jewish leaders that "There is salvation in no one else, for there is no other name under heaven given among mortals by which we must be saved," is something else entirely.

Peter, it seems, is intent on proclaiming "that in the grand reversal of the resurrection" – the condemned loser – the one they laughed at as he hung in agony on the cross – the one they thought they had disposed of -- this rejected stone is now the cornerstone – "*this* is the power of making broken lives whole."

In other words "the name of Jesus" is not a magical incantation nor is it a slogan for intolerance of other religious paths.

It is the Way.

"The Way is the way of humility and self-giving, it is the Way that rejects coercive power.

It is the Way of laying down one's life for others, of taking up the cross, of being a follower of Jesus."

"The Most Misused Scripture in the World," "Good, Life-giving Shepherd of Many Pastures,"  
D Mark Davis, 4/23/12.

It is the Way, in other words, of love.

Don't get me wrong.

Too often when we hear the word Love what comes to mind is sugary sentiment and gooey weak-kneed affection.

That's not the love Jesus is getting at.

The love of Jesus is tough, insistent, definitely crazy, constantly trying, patiently waiting and always ready to pay the consequences.

You don't need to take my word.

John tells us so quite clearly: that's what it means to be the good shepherd who dies for the flock; that's what it means for his followers to walk the talk: meaning that we don't just pray for the hungry, we feed them; we don't just feel bad for the naked, we clothe them.

It's the hard love of the parent of an addict who lets the child hit bottom, lets the child suffer the consequences of addiction, refusing to lessen the blows, since only in that great effort of parental self-sacrifice can the addict experience the pain that becomes the rope he may finally use to climb out of addiction.

It's the patient love of brothers and sisters who care for aging siblings; and children caring for aging parents; a patience that gradually comes to accept the profound role reversals such care brings; that comes to accept the loss unfolding before one's eyes.

It's the consistent love of parents raising children, having the courage to set limits and the wisdom to know when limits need to be spread out.

And it's the crazy love of opening churches and borders to all kinds of strangers and aliens and wayfarers, and seeing what might happen next!

In all these ways, with so many more left unsaid, in all the varieties of love that each situation requires, we lay down our lives for one another; and in that laying down, discover, sometimes quickly, sometimes slowly, the abundant life that Jesus promises to each and every one of us.

+amen

