

THE GOOD LIFE

a sermon on Acts 2:43-47, I Peter 2:19-35, and John 10:1-10

May 7, 2017 by Dr. Gregory A. Goodwiller

Sumner, Mississippi

So the apostles thought they finally had it all figured out . . . this discipleship business. When Jesus first “recruited” them into his little “band of followers,” they *now* understood, they had it all wrong. Jesus came to be much more than either an “earthly ruler” who would free them from the bondage of Rome, or a social do-gooder who would heal the sick and advocate for the less fortunate.

When we encounter them in our reading today from the book of Acts, the disciples had witnessed Jesus’ death, but then they had seen him *alive*, and they had received from him their “mission” to take the “Good News of the Gospel” to the ends of the earth. So now they knew that they were in the “salvation business.”

And they were *learning* what it meant to be “the Church,” even though they hadn’t even been *called* that just yet. As a demonstration of their mutual care and support – their “fellowship” – the little Christian community decided that its members would hold all things “in common.” And so they began to “pool” all their resources, and then they made distributions to everyone, or “as any had need,” as the writer describes it.

Life was *good* in those early days. It is reported that they “ate their food with glad and generous hearts,” and they “spent much time together in the temple.” Becoming a Christian began to look like a pretty good thing. Their communion *grew* steadily. And they were saying to themselves, “ah, so *this* is the good life – the *abundant* life Jesus talked about.”

But that was all about to change. It always does. The “good times” never seem to last for long, in this life. And maybe an important *first* lesson to learn from our text this morning about those early days of the first Christian community is simply how Jesus’ disciples seemed to *relish* in those early “happy days” and live them to the fullest — make the *most* of them. We often don’t *do* that . . . either because of our old Calvinist / puritanical roots that make us think having too much *fun* is a sin, or simply because we are too *preoccupied* with other matters — too much like Martha, so busy “serving” that we never quite get around to enjoying the moment, or perhaps like the apostles themselves at an earlier time, when Jesus told

them to “consider the lilies of the field” – spending our days *worried* about what we know will come, instead of appreciating what we have.

God really *does* provide for us. We really *do* have times of *abundance*, or at least of “plenty.” Good times. And in those times, we should eat our food “with glad and generous hearts.” We should be *thankful*, and we should *enjoy* ourselves.

What we must *not* do, is take such times for *granted*, or be naive about the world around us, while we are enjoying our current “moment.”

The story of the early community living in what we might call “communal abundance” comes crashing to an end a few chapters later in Acts – with the story of two of its new converts, Ananias and Sapphira, who kept back a bit of the proceeds from the sale of their property as they entered the community – you know, *just in case*. For a “rainy day.” I mean, who knows about this new movement. It is *great* right now. We are certainly *enjoying* the worship and the fellowship. But *some* day, we might not want to do it anymore, and *then* where would we be? We might want to move on to some *other* “new” movement that is even *more* exciting and fun. And then we might need our little “nest egg.”

That’s conjecture. We don’t know their real motives. We can only guess. But it isn’t hard to concoct any number of stories that are *believable* enough. After all, *we* don’t live the way those first Christians did – pooling all of our resources, and sharing them together. *These* days in the church, we’re lucky if we even have a few bucks laying around in a special fund to help someone in a time of need.

And then too, Ananias and Sapphira weren’t the *only* problem the disciples quickly encountered. It wasn’t long until Peter and John had been thrown in *prison* for their Christian activities, and there were threats of more arrests, and *punishment*.

And so all of a sudden, after such a great start, it *stopped* looking like such a great and wonderful thing to become a Christian! All of a sudden, Christians were being thrown in jail and even dropping dead (which is what happened to Ananias and Sapphira in God’s judgment for their sin!

And then to add insult to injury, an *internal* controversy began to erupt – one that eventually completely ensnared the church and threatened its unity.

Discipleship and “the Good life.” If “the Good Life” means a life of “plenty,” if it means *always* eating with “glad and generous hearts,” then

discipleship and “the Good Life” are certainly not synonymous. In fact, we might even conclude that they are *dichotomous* – that the further we move *toward* one, the further we move *away* from the other!

Except for one thing. Jesus said: “I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly.”

So then what did he *mean* by those words? We often quote them. But we seldom consider the *context* in which they were spoken.

Jesus was talking about himself as our *shepherd* in that passage, and as the “gate” through which the sheep pass on their way to safety. This Sunday is widely known as a “Good Shepherd Sunday,” in fact, when Jesus as our “Good Shepherd” is our guiding image for the day.

It is a powerful image (at least, it was a powerful image to its original audience who *knew* something about sheep and shepherds). The point is, in an ideal world – a world of plenty, a world of “safety,” there is no *need* of shepherds and the *protection* they offer their flocks. There are shepherds, in other words, precisely *because* there are wolves and other “predators” in the world, and because *on their own*, the flock cannot *find* the place of safety, and the “gate” through which to enter and enjoy the Good Life.

In the text in which Jesus says that he came to bring “abundant life,” he says, in essence, “there *are* real dangers out there. There are thieves, and robbers, and murderers. In *them*, and in their ways, is destruction. But in *me*, and in *my* ways, is abundant life.”

Of course, the “dangers” of this life come in all forms. Some of them are *physical* dangers – like any recent natural disasters you care to recollect.

Other dangers are more of a “spiritual” nature – our personal struggles to live in the light, divergent views on beliefs and issues of the day that bring division to the church in our day – as the controversy between Jewish and Greek Christians did in those early years, and as I said threatened the church’s unity.

In all of their forms, those dangers can cause us to lose faith and hope.

But they *shouldn’t*. Because it is just at those times when tragedy strikes, or temptation knocks, or fear sets in, that those words and that *invitation* of Jesus, to “enter by the Gate,” can speak clearly and forcefully to us.

The Christian Church exists *today* because when Peter and John were thrown in jail and beaten, and when Ananias and Sapphira died, and when Paul was shipwrecked, and jailed, and run out of towns, the disciples *continued to know* that Jesus Christ is Lord, continued to *trust* in him, continued to *enter* by the “gate,” and be “sheep” who belong to the “Good Shepherd.”

That kind of life is *truly* abundant and *good*, not because it is “happy,” but because it is good and abundant on the *inside*, where it really *counts*. Outward abundance is nice when it occurs. We should *enjoy* it, and give *thanks* for it.

But the *real* good life Jesus described is a life of *inward* goodness and abundance, a life that knows the perils and sees the complexities of life, and even knows sorrow and grief, and yet grasps eternity, and is only convinced all the more that our *real* hope is in the One who came into the world “not to condemn the world, but that the world through him might be saved.”

A *disciple* is a follower of the Risen Christ who understands that *in* this world of uncertainties, we *need* a shepherd. A disciple is one who chooses to enter by the Gate and join the “flock,” to *participate* in the company of those who are striving (not always perfectly!) to live by the ideals he taught, but who know that no matter *what* happens in the world around us . . . or even within our own four walls . . . we will always be in his care.

I commend to you the life of discipleship, the abundant life that our Lord offers to all who place their trust in him.

And to God be the glory. Amen.