

Detail:

4-26-20 Sermon "Hearts Overflowing"

I know we've only been together for about 10 months at this point, that we're still getting to know one another in this whole dance that we call "church," but I think there is one thing - maybe more but one in particular - that you should probably know about me, if you don't already. And I hope you won't judge me too harshly in hearing this confession, but I am just NOT a fan of country music. Not at all. I know it's huge now and lots and lots of people like it, and I'll admit that there is the occasional song that I don't mind, but as a genre I'm just not there, and I'm not going there. I can't tell you exactly why I don't like it - it could be in part because steel guitars are like fingernails on a chalkboard for me, or that a vocal twang has nearly the same effect; or it could be because as a child I had country music forced on me by my older sister. Regardless, I own one country music CD, and *only* because it was given to me years ago. I have zero country stations preset on my radio, and I spend zero time listening to country music...unless of course it's for a sermon illustration.

Another thing you should know, or at least that is helpful to know *about* me is that I know one or two lines of thousands of different songs, including country, but not the rest of the song, so when I'm reading something that includes a phrase that is a popular line in a song, my mind immediately jumps to those couple lines of song lyrics that I know, resulting in their becoming an ear worm that can last days. That kind of thing happened to me this week in preparing for this message, resulting in Johnny Lee's song, "Looking for Love," being stuck in my head for days.

You know the song, or at least these lines,

“I was lookin' for love in all the wrong places,
Lookin' for love in too many faces,
searchin' their eyes and lookin' for traces
of what I'm dreamin' of.”

There. Now I've given that ear worm to *you* to carry for a while.

This song came to me while doing my study for this sermon because one commentator I read suggested that Jesus is telling us here that in looking for life, particularly abundant life, we often look in all the wrong places. And deep down, as much as we may struggle to admit it, I think we know that that is true.

We have two passages to consider today in this message of “Overflowing Hearts.” The first is from the Gospel of John, the second from the Acts of the Apostles. The Gospel of John, the fourth gospel and the last one written, is described by different theologians, scholars, or commentators often as the “pretty Gospel,” or the “spiritual gospel.” Adam Hamilton writes that when he wants to understand the “what” of the gospels he goes to Matthew, Mark, or Luke to get the history, but if he wants to understand the “why,” he turns to John. And many scholars assume that by the time John was written, the author found that there were already credible histories of Jesus' ministry out there for Jesus' followers, so he chose instead to write a gospel that spoke to the meaning of Jesus' life, ministry, death, and resurrection. In doing so he created what other writers have called a “metaphorical” or “symbolic” gospel.

Theologian Jaime Soles-Clark suggests that if you are “lover of the literal,” or a “maligner of the metaphor,” then today’s passage (and perhaps this entire Gospel) is not for you. She then offers that,

“The whole Gospel of John is nothing if not a piling up of metaphors, figures of speech. How else are we to convey truth about God? What single image, what single word could suffice?”^[1]

She then goes on to offer just a few of the metaphors used for Jesus in this Gospel, “How can Jesus be the shepherd, the gate, and the gatekeeper all at once? The same way he's the way, the truth and the life in ch. 14; the true vine in ch. 15; the light of the world in ch. 8; the resurrection and the life in ch. 11, the true bread of heaven which the father gives in ch. 6, and so on.

He's all of this and more. All of these metaphors get at Jesus' nature and function as Creator, Redeemer, and Sustainer of the world.”^[2]

At the same time, we know that Jesus was not literally a vine, a gate, a light or bread, right? That is the power, the role of metaphor.

And I share this because so often, as readers of scripture, as followers of Jesus, and sometimes as “defenders of the faith,” we try to take what was intended as metaphor and turn it into a literalism - we take what was intended to paint a picture and try to turn it into a high definition photograph. For example, our passage from John 10 today:

“I assure you that whoever doesn't enter into the sheep pen through the gate but climbs over the wall is a thief and an outlaw. The one who enters through the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. The guard at the gate opens the gate for him, and the sheep listen to his voice.

He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. Whenever he has gathered all of his sheep, he goes before them and they follow him, because they know his voice. They won't follow a stranger but will run away because they don't know the stranger's voice."

Now, it's important to note the next line in this passage after Jesus finishes speaking says that "Those who heard Jesus use this analogy didn't understand what he was saying." The disciples didn't understand Jesus' metaphor. So what does he do? He gives them another metaphor.

So Jesus spoke again, "I assure you that I am the gate of the sheep.

All who came before me were thieves and outlaws, but the sheep didn't listen to them. I am the gate.

Whoever enters through me will be saved. They will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief

*enters only to steal, kill, and destroy. **I came so that they could have life—indeed, so that they could live life to the fullest.** - John 10: 1-10*

Many Christians hear this passage in an exclusive way; they hear Jesus say that he is "the gate" and that "whoever enters through me will be saved" and assume that he means here that those who *don't* enter by him are **not** saved. But I would suggest to you that first, that is not what he is suggesting, and that second, what Jesus means by "saved" and what we often mean by "saved" are two entirely different things. And here's why I say that.

First, this entire passage of metaphorical statements about Jesus as shepherd, as gate, as gatekeeper must be viewed through the lens of Jesus' concluding statement, "I came so that they could have life - indeed, so they could live life to the fullest." Other translations say "abundant life."

This was the point Jesus was trying to make here, not that some were in and some were out, not that some were condemned sinners and others were saved sheep, but that his reason for coming was to bring *life - abundant life*. If you doubt that you need look no further than earlier in the same Gospel, John 3:16-17 (those two verses should always be read together in order to truly understand the message) where it says,

"For God so loved the world that he gave his only Son, so that everyone who believes in him may not perish but may have," what?

"Eternal *life*. 17"Indeed," it continues, "God ~~did not~~ send the Son into the world to *condemn* the world, but in order that the world might be saved through him."

He came to bring life so that others might be saved through him. But what does being "saved" or *salvation* mean in our passage from John 10?

Many modern Christians, when they hear "saved," think "heaven," or some blessed afterlife in the presence of God. Well, as you've heard me say this many times before, but *context* is everything. Our reading today, found within a larger section of scripture, immediately follows a passage where Jesus heals a man born blind - a metaphor for others, including the disciples, who can't see who Jesus is or what he means. We go from that visual, if you will, to this passage of metaphor after metaphor, with the insertion for clarification that the people he's talking to don't understand him, can't "see" what it is he's suggesting. And in that passage about the blind man his disciples ask Jesus, "who sinned to cause this man's blindness, the man or his parents?" to which Jesus replies, "Neither." The passage isn't about sin, it's about salvation, it's about life, even abundant life. What would

salvation look like, what would new life, abundant look like for the man born blind?

It would, at the very least, include the restoration of his sight, would it not? The disciples, like us much of time, were looking through a lens of sin, while Jesus is looking through a lens of abundance, of grace, of life. To paraphrase Johnny Lee, “we’re looking for life in all the wrong places.”

In our passage from Acts, we have what is often lifted up as the “model” church community, where all the people sell all they have, share with one another, and give to the poor. Critics label this as a socialistic utopia.

This passage is often shared during stewardship campaigns to paint an idealistic picture of what generosity can look like - I’ve probably done it myself, truth be told. But we have to also recognize that this model is nowhere else lifted up in the New Testament, not in any of the gospels, not in any of Paul’s letters to his churches, nowhere. This is a picture of what the faith community in this one place looked like, a model of how one community cared for one another and found life together, but nowhere does it suggest that this is the newest and greatest church growth model for the consultants to roll out across denominations. Theologian Matthew Skinner says of this passage,

“Acts 2:42-47 describes a community of faith that operates in the power of God's Spirit. The virtues of justice, worship, and mutuality are not **accomplishments** of extraordinary folk; they are signs of the Spirit within a community of people who understand themselves as united in purpose and identity--not a dispersed collection of individual churchgoers. This is not to say that the members of a community of faith bear no responsibility for living in a way that displays God's

reconciliation. The audacious claims of a resurrection faith demand such boldness from us.”^[3]

To borrow from Paul then, this sense of generosity, of community, of sharing and abundant life that we find in this location of the early church is a sign of, a fruit of and a response to the presence of the Holy Spirit.

In these two scriptures, from Acts and from John, we see the desire of God for us to live life to the fullest, while also caring for and supporting one another in having abundant life and community, food and gladness. The “thief” in the John passage need not be understood as a person, but could be **anything** that robs us of those things.

Sometimes that thief is something that happens to us, a pandemic that forces us into isolation, for example.

Other times, though, that which robs us of abundant life are things we’ve brought upon ourselves, things like materialism or consumerism, where we falsely believe that it is more and better stuff that is going to bring us happiness or a better life. Sometimes it’s a political, theological, or ideological philosophy that is the thief, the thinking that if everyone was just like me, thought like me, looked like me, loved like me, voted like me, that then life would be good.

But for us now, in this time of pandemic, it can sometimes feel as though the sacrifices we have endured because of our attempts to slow this virus can make us feel as if we’ve been “robbed” of our well-being. But we can also turn that around and see that these sacrifices are how we share goodwill and well-being with one another. Our hearts overflow with the grace and guidance we know from the Shepherd and we want that goodness for everyone. Glad and

generous hearts overflow with love in so many ways, and in that overflowing, abundant life given by God spills out for us and for everyone. I think this passage tells us that we need to take responsibility for how often we have been cheated -- or, as knowing participants in the charade, perhaps we should say, cheated ourselves -- by settling for something less than abundant life. Don't be too hard on yourself - we've all done this. I would simply invite us to take an honest look at the choices we've made, the strategies we've employed, the things we have relied upon, to bring ourselves authentic, abundant life and ask whether or not we're truly satisfied. Because the fact of the matter is that after all of our seeking and searching and shopping, we still end up far short of experiencing the abundant life Jesus promises. Perhaps we don't know how to achieve such life (and of course naming it an "achievement" is part of the problem!).

Or perhaps we're afraid of what it takes to receive it. I suspect that authentic abundant life -- which Jesus here describes as flowing from relationship with Jesus and through him with God -- demands that we be more vulnerable than we're most often prepared to be.

As David Lose reminds us,

“It is **this** very real human condition and dilemma that God embraces 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 has embraced them all. And when he is resurrected, 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.”^[4]

This, abundant life, everlasting life, hearts overflowing with love, is what Jesus promises to us. It's not something we can earn or achieve, we can't buy it or borrow it, it doesn't come in an Amazon box on the front porch any more that it comes by excluding those who are somehow different than us.

It is a gift, the unmerited gift of a God who loves us enough to show us, in Jesus, how to die to our current and lifeless way of living in order to be born again into a new and abundant life in Jesus Christ, here and now.

There are many in this world who would claim to be the shepherd, who would suggest that **only they** can lead us through the valley of the shadow of death, who would suggest that a return to “normal” - to the old way - is the way of salvation. I would suggest to you that these are the thieves and bandits of this world that Jesus referred to, who would rob us of life, who would cheat us of abundance. And so Jesus comes as the gatekeeper and good shepherd, the one who knows his sheep and who calls us by name so that we might know the difficult truth about ourselves and how we often place our faith in the wrong things, and then hear and believe God's promise of abundant life. These two truths, the truth about how often we search for love and life in all the wrong places and the second truth, that God in Christ understands, embraces, and redeems us in love -- are the core of the Gospel message in John. From start to finish and everywhere in between, the Gospel of John announces that the sole purpose of God's creative acts and Christ's work on the cross is to bring life, abundant and overflowing life.

And it is when we place our faith and our trust there that our hearts overflow with love. Amen.

^[1](workingpreacher.org, Commentary on John 10:1-10, accessed 4-20-20)

^[2] Ibid

^[3] workingpreacher.org, Commentary on Acts 2:42-47, Accessed 4-20-20

^[4] workingpreacher.org, Commentary on John 10:1-10, Accessed on 4-20-20.