

September Series: Living Creatively
“Life to the Full (And What Exactly Does that Look Like?)”
Ephesians 3:14-21 and John 10:10

Sermon by Jan Edmiston

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Note: Our first lesson from Paul's letter to the Ephesians begins “For this reason . . .” which begs the question, “For *what* reason?” If you look at how Chapter 3 begins, it says this, “This is the reason that I Paul am a prisoner for Christ Jesus . . .” The reason that Paul was in prison was because he had been preaching that the Jews and Gentiles were one in Christ. And these were fighting words to most of the Jewish leaders, so they had had him arrested. And instead of moaning about life as a captive, Paul was writing words of hope to the people of Ephesus who were trying to follow Jesus.

When we were looking for an image we could use on the cover of this week's bulletin, I did what many of us do when we need a picture of something: I googled it. Specifically, I googled for an image of “abundant life” on my computer. And the results were rather surprising.

I expected to see multiple images of fullness – cornucopias filled with fruit and vegetables, or baskets filled with bread. But to my surprise, one of the first images that popped up under “abundant life” was a black and white ink close-up drawing of the crucifixion of Jesus.

Specifically, Jesus is lying on his back on a cross with a razor-sharp crown of thorns on his head, his left arm pointed to the front of the picture streaked with blood, his fingers limp and lifeless, while a stronger hand holding a mallet is hammering a spike into Jesus' left hand. Jesus' eyes are open and he is painfully, but gently looking – it seems – right into the face on his executioner.

This is an image of abundant life?

When Jesus said, “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly,” he was using the metaphor of sheep and shepherds to explain his role to some of the Jewish leaders – the Pharisees¹. Jesus described it this way: he is the gate through which sheep pass to join the flock. In other words, *Jesus is **the way** to belong to God's family*, to God's flock.

Jesus warned that there would be others who *claim* to lead people to God. But they are pretenders. Jesus calls them “thieves and bandits.” *Those thieves will destroy* he said, but “I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.”

I'm not sure what “abundant life” looks like for real sheep – plenty of food and a kind shepherd who leads and protects the flock, I suppose. But we can be fairly certain that **being slaughtered** would not constitute “life to the full.”

¹ In the 1st Century AD, the Jews were divided into 4 schools of thought: the Pharisees, Sadducees, revolutionaries, and Essenes, according to the ancient historian Josephus.

And yet someone, someplace – at least in the cyber world – connected the sacrifice of Jesus with abundant life.

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A full life, an abundant life is not the same as a busy life. I know a lot of people whose calendars are booked solid, but they wouldn't say they have an abundant life. An abundance of activities? Yes. An abundance of responsibilities? Sure. An abundance of chores on their "to do" list? Absolutely. But *an abundant life*? Not really.

An abundant life is not the same as "having it all" either. You know how popular magazines tout the notion of "having it all" – great job, happy family, nice home, cool car, fun friends. I knew a woman once who had an amazing job in Washington, rubbing elbows with all kinds of important people. She was fully vested in her company and was receiving big checks for just showing up. She was married to a successful guy who always looked like a Ralph Lauren model. She had two healthy children. She was beautiful and smart and lived in a great house.

But she came to me as a pastor, because she was miserable. Her husband didn't really love her, she said. She told me that when they got married, they'd planned a honeymoon to Europe, but he got a call from work the day before the wedding and so he cancelled the honeymoon. And even though she went with him to Bermuda for his "emergency work meeting" she only saw him one night during that week.

And once, she told me that she hadn't talked with her sisters in two years because there was a dispute over her father's estate. She was supposed to get something that her older sisters got, and so she wasn't speaking to them.

Now I'm not saying that people with beauty and money and nice homes are all miserable. But those things don't guarantee an abundant life. We envy that kind of life maybe – or what that life seems to be. But it's not necessarily "life to the full."

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When Paul wrote his letter to the Christians at Ephesus² he was writing from prison, probably in Rome. Paul had been raised a devout Jew,³ he made tents by profession,⁴ and he once terrorized Christians in Jerusalem.⁵

But after his conversion to Christianity, Paul was the first to proclaim "the mystery of Christ" – meaning this: that God had come to *both Jews and non-Jews*, and that "the chosen people" now included the Gentiles.

² Ephesus is located in what is now western Turkey.

³ Romans 11:1, Galatians 1:14, Philippians 3:5

⁴ Acts 18:3

⁵ Acts 8:1-3, Acts 9:1-2

While traveling throughout what is now Turkey and Greece, Paul lived in Ephesus for two years⁶ -- a city filled with shrines to the Greek goddess Artemis. In fact the Temple of Artemis – one of the Seven Wonders of the World – would have been standing majestically in the center of town when Paul lived there. He caused quite a stir when he wouldn't stop talking about Jesus, but apparently some people listened. They are the ones who received this letter we read from today.

It was after Paul *left* Ephesus that he was arrested in Jerusalem for reportedly bringing Gentiles into the inner court of the Jewish Temple where *not even the Jewish women* were allowed.

And from there, Paul's life took a turn that none of us would consider "abundant." Actually, there *was* an abundance of danger.

From his arrest in Jerusalem to his prison time in Rome, Paul faced flogging, death threats, and a prison boat shipwreck. And still, while under house arrest in Rome, he wrote these words, which *inspire the weak* and *comfort those who question whether or not they are loved*.

<p>I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God</p>
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Paul – writing from prison – had a more abundant life than most people who live in luxury. How is that possible? What does it take to have this?

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This month, the theme of the sermons continues to be: Living Creatively.

There is the kind of creativity that comes from being gifted in artistic pursuits: painting, writing, composing, sculpting.

And then there is the kind of creativity that comes from being *gifted spiritually*. When Paul was in prison, he did not languish in his captivity. He crafted a life that took even the negative and he sculpted it into something positive. He was a *spiritual Renaissance man*.

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⁶ Acts 19:10

Do you remember George Plimpton who died a few years ago? People called *him* a Renaissance Man. He spent his life doing amazing things. He was not only a famous writer and editor, but he also worked briefly as a professional athlete, a stand-up comedian, a movie bad guy, and a circus performer.⁷ George Plimpton certainly lived a **full and abundant life**.

But *Paul* is a great example of someone who lived a **full and abundant life** because *he was gifted in spiritual ways*. Look at the gifts that Paul recognizes just in this small part of his letter: he knew that. . .

- It was a gift to be included in God's family, in God's *flock* if you will.
- It was a gift to be loved so absolutely by God, a love that surpasses all knowledge.
- It was a gift to have the power of God working within us, a power that "is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.

By this definition, Paul was certainly a spiritual Renaissance man because he used all the gifts God gave him and created a full life in spite of the fact that he endured his own measure of suffering – in *his* case, prison.

And here is another mystery: sometimes **it's the suffering** that allows us to have such an abundant life.

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One Tuesday morning, during my sabbatical, the phone rang at home and it was one of my colleagues, someone on the staff of another church in the Presbytery. She said that she was sorry to bother me during my sabbatical, but I was the only person who could help her. A co-worker of her husband had been diagnosed with brain cancer just before Memorial Day, and his prognosis was not good. But on Sunday – just two days before – he and his long-time girlfriend decided that they wanted to get married. They had been dating for many years and had not seen the need to get married, until now. They wanted to spend Jeff's last months as husband and wife.

My friend said that while they were not members of a church, they wanted God to be a part of their wedding and that the cancer had brought a newfound faith to them. Once upon a time, the bride had been Presbyterian and I was the only Presbyterian minister my friend knew who didn't have to be at the Presbytery meeting that Tuesday night because I was on sabbatical.

"They want to get married tonight?" I said.

⁷ According to George Plimpton's obituary in New York Times, September 27, 2003.

“Yes,” said my friend. “It will be very small, but they’ve reserved the court beside the pool at their building and, they’ve reserved a justice of the peace to officiate, but what they really want is a minister who will talk about God.”

Of course I would do this wedding.

There was certainly no time for pre-marital counseling. In fact, I first laid eyes on the bride and groom just 45 minutes before the wedding. They lived down the hall from each other in the same building and were about my age.

First I met the bride in her apartment. Her parents were there. They had flown in from the Midwest and they were excited that their daughter was (finally) getting married. And down the hall I met the groom whose best friend was there, not only to hold the rings but also to help his friend walk.

After several treatments, the groom was very weak. He wore an eye patch because his vision was blurry and he walked with a cane because his legs sometimes gave out. And instead of standing at an altar, the bride and groom would sit on a bench by the pool while I officiated in front of a handful of family and friends. There would be no reception. The groom was simply too weak.

I prayed with the couple individually – that God would bless their wedding and their life together, and that God would give them both strength. And while they got dressed, each in their own apartments, I waited downstairs.

The plan was that the best man would walk on Jeff’s right and I would walk on Jeff’s left so that he wouldn’t have to get married using that cane. And when he came downstairs, he wasn’t wearing his eye patch either.

As we walked out toward the courtyard, there was a sharp turn from the ramp up to the pool area. We walked together – the three of us – and slowly turned the corner where we saw something that took our breath away: standing there by the pool were about 300 people who had come – with 2 days notice – to Beth and Jeff’s wedding. They stood and applauded this man whom most of them had not seen since his diagnosis in May. Everyone was crying tears of joy.

We made our way to the bench where the groom was supposed to sit, but he motioned to me that he thought he could stand. We looked back toward the door and turning the corner was the bride, escorted by her father, who was also greeted by this amazing crowd of friends clapping and cheering.

We’ve all been to many weddings. And so you can imagine what it’s like to have a dying man and the woman he loves face each other standing before God and surrounded by family and friends and promise *to be faithful to each other for richer, for poorer, in sickness and in health, as long as they both shall live* knowing that life may not last very long.

There was a feast – all the guests had brought food and drink. And the bride and groom even had the stamina to dance at their wedding.

That night – with a terrible prognosis and a strange minister on one of the hottest nights of the summer, a dying man realized that he had an abundant life. He was a member of God's family. He was surrounded by a love that surpasses all knowledge. And God had allowed him to accomplish much more than he could ask or imagine.

This is what an abundant life looks like. It's not about stuff. It's not even about weddings or parties. It's about being loved.

Paul was not necessarily a very lovable guy. In fact, many people wanted him dead. But he was aware of **the breadth and length and height and depth of God's love for him in Christ** and it filled him with **the fullness of God**.

- If you have come today feeling empty, there is a feast prepared that can fill us up.
- If you have come feeling lost and alone, there is a gate through which you can enter to join God's flock and be protected by the Good Shepherd.
- If you are exhausted and don't think you can carry on, there is a promise that a power exists which can work within us to accomplish more than we can ask or imagine.

God has spiritually gifted us and by grace, we can deal **even with our sorrows** in a creative way. We too can be spiritual Renaissance people – souls who carry on with courage and strength because we are filled with the fullness of God.

What picture do you imagine when you hear the words “abundant life”? In Christ, life can be abundant even when we are threatened, even in prison, even in when we are on the cusp of death. And so whatever is threatening you, whatever is keeping you captive, whatever is destroying you – let us bow before God and remember that we are in God's family through this Jesus who knew what it was like to die.

Remembering his life and his death, let us have confidence in Jesus, the gate to a full life.

Let us pray:

Lord, even in our sorrows, allow us the strength to dance. Bless our lives with the spiritual power we need to live as you made us to live. Through Jesus Christ our Savior. Amen.