

Life Abundant***Rev. Christi O. Brown******Morningsong & Sanctuary Services (Baccalaureate Sunday)******May 19, 2019*****John 10: 2-4; 7-10**

Our Scripture passages today all have to do with abundance and God's blessings. This passage is from the Gospel according to John. It is called the Good Shepherd discourse. Jesus had just healed a blind man on the Sabbath. In response, the Pharisees investigated the healing, even arguing with and driving out the blind man who advocated for Jesus. At this point in the passage, Jesus continues speaking to a crowd, including the Pharisees. He non-discreetly calls many of them out as thieves, contrasting their role with his own as the shepherd and gate to his sheep. And at the end, Jesus tells the people the remarkable reason for his coming. Hear now the word of God:

“²The one who enters by the gate is the shepherd of the sheep. ³The gatekeeper opens the gate for him, and the sheep hear his voice. He calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. ⁴When he has brought out all his own, he goes ahead of them, and the sheep follow him because they know his voice...”

⁷Again Jesus said to them, “Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. ⁸All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. ⁹I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. **I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.**

The Word of God for the People of God. Thanks be to God.

2 Corinthians 9:6-8

In this letter to the Corinthians, Paul continues to work to establish a long-term relationship with the Corinthian church. In this section, he encourages support for others and generosity in response to God's abundant blessings.

Hear now the word of God:

The point is this: the one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully. ⁷Each of you must give as you have made up your mind, not reluctantly or under compulsion, for God loves a cheerful giver.

⁸And God is able to provide you with **every blessing in abundance**, so that by always having enough of everything, you may **share abundantly** in every good work.

*The Word of God for the People of God. **Thanks be to God.***

Prayer for Illumination

Almighty One, by the power of the Holy Spirit, open our ears, our hearts our minds, illuminating them so that we might hear your powerful word for our lives this very day. In your holy and gracious name we pray, Amen.

Sermon

Today is baccalaureate Sunday, when we celebrate the high school Seniors who are graduating and moving on to new adventures. It also happens to be my last official Sunday on staff here. As many of you know, I told the church a year ago that when my youngest daughter graduated from preschool this month, I would “graduate” along with her. And since I’m not really retiring, as I plan to do other projects around Spartanburg, “graduating” seems like the best descriptive word.

I have loved my six plus years of ministry here, working the first couple of years with young adults and more recently with local missions. It has been a privilege to serve with this staff, and to grow in faith alongside each of you, and to see how much our church has accomplished working together.

And so I love that it’s “graduation” Sunday. Seniors, when I came on staff, you were just finishing 6th grade and were 12 years old. That probably feels like forever ago for you, but not for the rest of us. I can’t believe how you’ve grown. Most of you were shorter than me then, and many of you are taller than me now. But it’s been wonderful to see how you’ve grown spiritually as well, especially with your experiences like Confirmation Retreats, Salkehatchie, Montreat weeks, Sunday school, mission projects and Sunday night programs.

So my sermon today is a graduation message geared towards the Seniors, but applicable to all. Because even though it’s officially about the new beginnings our Seniors will experience, the truth is that because of the hope of the resurrection of our Lord Jesus Christ, we are all granted new beginnings each and every day. As our beloved hymn proclaims, morning by morning new mercies we see.

Truth be told, for a while I fretted over what to say in my final sermon today. After all, it could be the last official time to share with you all that I've ever wanted to teach or say. I had a hard time figuring out what the focus should be because I have so much I want to say and celebrate with you. But then God did what God has consistently done for me so many times before in my life when I've been stressed, and placed certain Scripture passages on my heart.

These passages are the ones we read this morning that have to do with life abundant. Because truly, for all of the graduates, and for all of the congregation, there is nothing I hope and pray for more for each of you than that you will live a life of abundance. That you will fully live into the gifts God has blessed you with, thriving in life, and in turn share those blessings with others.

After all, as we heard in the John passage this morning, this is the very reason Jesus came, that we—as his sheep, his followers, his disciples—may have life, and have it abundantly. There is no greater gift. And it seems that if we don't live out that abundant life with which he has graced us, then perhaps we are doing nothing less than falling short of our potential and squandering our inheritance. And that, of course, is not what God wants for us. What's remarkable is that God longs for us to live an abundant life. A life *full* of grace and blessings. A life where we thrive in the love and care of Christ.

This passage tells us that Jesus is not only the Good Shepherd who calls us by name and leads us to find green pastures, but Jesus is also the gate—the point of access to God who brings us life abundant.

Think about a gate you've entered. Maybe it was on a farm, or to a swimming pool, or even one in your backyard. The gate I most remember is the one on the

gravel road to my grandparents' mountain cabin. My grandfather had a great sense of humor and was always joking around with us. When we were young and drove up to the gate, he would tell us to close our eyes and count to 100, and that something amazing was going to happen. And sure enough, when we finished counting several minutes later and opened our eyes, our car was on the other side of the closed gate. To our delight, he hyped up how magical it was that our counting had helped us pass right through the gate.

Now of course we instinctively knew that he had gotten out of the car, unlocked the gate, moved the car, and then closed the gate back while we were counting. But yet it was still fun for our little minds to imagine that we had super powers to get his 10-year old Datsun station wagon to pass right through that big locked aluminum gate.

That gate was there to keep the remote mountain property safe. But in many cases, including in Biblical times, gates have been used to keep animals corralled, which offer them great protection, but not great freedom. And yet what I love about this passage where Jesus says he's the gate to the sheep, is that in the very next breath he also says, "Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture." (v9)

Meaning Jesus is not a gate that will keep us hemmed in, nor one which will open us up to the big wide world with never the opportunity to return to the safety of the gated pasture. He states we will always have the freedom through him to be able to come in and go out. To explore the expansive fields, but to return home to the

safe places when we need to. Meaning we have the freedom to live the abundant life that He provides for us.

Jesus says that we are able to come in and go out in order to find pasture. And this finding means to explore in order to learn, gain knowledge and understand. All of this is so important to remember as you are launched from the nest upon graduation. Because what's so exciting, and a little scary (at least for your parents) is that the gate is about to be flung wide open for you to experience and explore the expansive world.

But it's important for the rest of us to remember this open gate as well. Especially those of us who are middle-aged or older, who might feel a bit stuck in life right now. We have to remember that the gate is still open for us to come and go as well. A gateway for us to find and explore new verdant green pastures in life.

And as we all think about trekking out to new adventures, I love the assurance implied by His over-the-top desires and love expressed for us in this passage. The original Greek words used for life abundant mean “superabundant, exceeding abundantly above, highly beyond measure, of the absolute fullness of life. A life that's deeply devoted to God. A blessed life that's real and genuine, active and vigorous.”¹ And that, my dear ones, is what God wants for you and for all of us. To live fully into this abundant life that Jesus opens up for us.

But let's also be candid and clear—living abundantly does not always mean living easily. There are dangers out in the fields. Sometimes the hills of life are going to

¹ https://www.blueletterbible.org/rsv/jhn/10/1/t_conc_1007010

be really hard to climb. Sometimes you're going to trip and fall and get hurt and wonder how in the world you'll carry on. Sometimes you're going to encounter things that feel evil. Sometimes, like Jesus mentioned in our passage, thieves will try to steal your joy.

And when anything like this happens—and trust me it will at various points in your life—remember the Shepherd that calls you by name and goes ahead of you. Remember the gate that is always open for you. Remember the blessings you do have in your life. One of my favorite quotes that is by Billy Graham that helps me in times like these is “The will of God will never take us where the grace of God cannot sustain us.”

The truth is that in order to explore, you will have to be vulnerable. We have *the best* community here, but sometimes it means you live life in somewhat of a bubble. And when you leave that bubble to broaden your horizons, you will likely have doubts and questions, which are perfectly normal and okay. It's actually healthy to have these, even if it's hard. Faith is about searching for answers while simultaneously trusting in God. Faith is about feeding and being fed. So throughout it all, keep looking for those green pastures to feed upon, and never stop grazing on the Word of God.

On the flip side, and what's super-exciting, is that there will also be those times in life when you absolutely soar. When the pastures are ultra-green, and the whole world seems bright and beautiful. When it is easy to live the abundant life. And it is then that we must especially remember to share those blessings and to show others the way to the green pastures.

And this is exactly what Paul was urging the Corinthians to do in the passage of the letter we read today. In fact, he got straight to the point of both the importance of generosity and the consequences of stinginess, stating, “The one who sows sparingly will also reap sparingly, and the one who sows bountifully will also reap bountifully.” (v6) Also reminding them, and us today, that “God is able to provide you with *every blessing in abundance*, so that by always having enough of everything, you may *share abundantly* in every good work.” (v8)

In other words, God will not abandon or shortchange you. God provides more than enough for us in our lives, and it is our duty to share that love and joy and grace with others. Paul is essentially saying “you get what you give” in life. So give generously. And it doesn’t have to be a monetary gift, which is great news when you’re a college student on a tight budget. In fact, this passage specifically says to share abundantly in good deeds.

And don’t think for a second that you’re too young or inexperienced to make a difference in others’ lives. Everyone has God-given gifts to offer.

I think about Will Delaney, a church member who was a high school junior at Boiling Springs when he asked his mom if they could start serving meals to the homeless here in our community. So he and his mother started coordinating and serving a monthly Tuesday night meal here at the church. For over 4 years now, they’ve been serving these meals on the fourth Tuesday. And even though Will is a college student at PC now, he drives back every month to serve these meals to his homeless friends, often bringing his fraternity brothers along with him to serve.

Or your fellow classmate Anne Dobson Ball, who began to notice that the same people were walking down the road with their belongings in plastic bags. And so she went to her teachers and said, “What can we do to help those in our community that have so little?” And she and several classmates started the free little pantry that sits in front of the Arthur Center. They keep it stocked with snacks and toiletries for anyone who might need a little extra help.

Or my nephew Slate, who is graduating from high school in Greenville this year, who noticed a kid in his class that needed help. He went home and told his parents about this guy who was smart and friendly, but who needed a place to shower because he and his mother were living out of their car. He said, “What can we do to help him?” So Slate’s family took him under their wing, and helped connect this family to the help they needed to get into an apartment. This friend often hangs out with Slate’s family, and he even had a blast tubing with us on the lake last summer, smiling from ear-to-ear and shouting for us to go faster and faster. It was a beautiful thing to see him enjoying in the sheer delights of life like any kid should be able to do.

Another example is when I was a college student at Wofford a little over 20 years ago. Some friends and I who cared about the environment found it very upsetting that the campus canteen served every single meal in a Styrofoam box. So we went to one of the college deans and said, “What can we do to change this? What about using reusable plastic baskets?” And they listened and made the change. And although I haven’t been to the canteen in quite a few years, the last time I was there, I was delighted to see that they were still using the reusable plastic baskets.

In all of these cases, all that was needed in order to begin to make positive changes for others was the simple question of “What can I do to change this situation for the better? To make life a little better for the next person?” And then a willingness to take those small steps toward change.

And for those of you who think only youth have the energy to make these small changes that make a big impact on others, then listen to this story I read recently about a man named Wally Richardson.² He’s a 95-year old WWII veteran who, for more than 20 years, has spent his mornings inspiring middle schoolers in California. He sits with his schnauzer on a bench in front of the school, joyfully greeting and extending life wisdom to students as they enter the school.

His “Wallyisms” are so popular that the kids engage in a call-and-response with him. “If Plan A doesn’t work,” Wally calls out, and the kids call back, “There are 25 other letters in the alphabet!” Wally says he does this every day because adolescence can be hard, and young people need all the help they can get. “The future depends on your youth,” he says. “This is how I show them that they are all loved and accepted for who they are.”

He believes that love is the force behind anything worth doing. Wally says, “People think God is up there, but there’s really no separation between you and God. God is always working through your soul, through the way you express yourself to others.” He believes in the idea of not letting anyone come to you without leaving better and happier. Wally himself was inspired by his own middle

² Kimberly Elkins. “Everyday Greatness: Wally Richardson. How the Greatest Generation is Inspiring the Latest Generation.” *Guideposts*, May 2019; vol 74, issue 3.

school PE teacher who told them that “what you do makes you what you are.” He’s never forgotten that wisdom, and his daily goal is to spread joy to others. He is living a life abundant indeed.

It reminds me of a favorite quote carried around by Presbyterian pastor and beloved TV personality Mr. Rogers, which reads:

One has achieved success who has lived well, laughed often, and loved much...Who has never lacked appreciation of Earth's beauty or failed to express it...Who has left the world better than one found it...Who has always looked for the best in others and given them the best one has, whose life was an inspiration, whose memory a benediction.³

So for all of you, graduates and beyond, this is the kind of life success I wish for you. A life full of the love and grace of God. A life where you come and go through the gate. It might not always be as easy as counting to 100 and passing straight through, and there might be fields full of strenuous hills to climb and muddy ruts to navigate. But the Good Shepherd will lead the way, and the gate will always be open. And when you do pass through the gate, you can feast upon the green pastures. And live a life full of blessings that you generously share with others. A life abundant indeed. This is my hope and prayer for you.

May God bless you and keep you always. Amen & Amen.

³ “Success” by Bessie Anderson Stanley, 1904.
https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Bessie_Anderson_Stanley