

“That They May Have Life”

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Acts 2:41-47

John 10:1-10

When my daughter Zoey was little, one of her best friends was a little boy from our church. They were in nursery school together, had play dates after school, and hung out together in Sunday School. His family moved away when he was about 4 years old and none of us kept in touch. But recently Zoey reconnected with him on Facebook. He was going through a major change in his life. He was in the process of becoming a woman.

I chatted on Facebook with him, now her, several times last summer, and was fascinated to hear that she had always had dreams about being a girl. Later she found out that her male and female hormone levels were both low, but within normal range for either a boy or a girl. Her parents were conservative Christians and they pressured and embarrassed her enough that she conformed outwardly to a male identity. But she felt very much alone. And once she graduated from college and left home, she started the physical transition to become female. She said she would have preferred to have been born with a female body, or to have a male brain. But as it was, her brain and body didn’t match, and it’s easier to change your body than your whole sense of self. She said it felt like fixing a birth defect, like a cleft palate. If you had the choice to fix it, would you go on living with a cleft palate just because you were born that way?

All this is background to a conversation we had this week when she posted a video on Facebook that exposed the worst of Christianity. It was a clip from 2007 when a Hindu clergyman was invited to offer the morning prayer for the US Senate. He started to pray, but was interrupted by protesting Christians who shouted the name of Jesus from the gallery, and that his prayer was an abomination. Thankfully they were arrested and removed from the room, but not before they announced before the whole assembly, “We are Christians and patriots.”*

My friend also posted a story about a Christian lobbyist who threatened to organize a national boycott of any pro-football team that drafted Michael Sam. Sam’s the University of Missouri player who announced in February that he was gay, and some people predicted it would ruin his career as a football player. By the way, he was drafted last night by the St. Louis Rams. Still, some Christians told him he was “hellbound for eternity with no chance of escape, where the demons ... torture you forever...” My friend wrote that these are examples of why she is no longer a Christian.

Her post on Facebook led to a long (and thankfully thoughtful) discussion of Christian beliefs and the Bible. But it’s sad that these kinds of conversations are still necessary. So many people, especially young people, have written off the message of Christ, because of the way it is presented by Christians who would suck the life out of it. For some Christians the whole message is organized around salvation from sin, and

conforming people's lives to certain conventional behaviors. Now, I agree that sin can suck the life out of us, and that all of us need forgiveness, over and over. And Jesus does offer us forgiveness from sin. And that is truly good news. But that was not the only point of Jesus' ministry on earth, especially according to the gospel of John.

We read the beginning of John every year around Christmas, as it lays out the themes for the whole story of Jesus' life. "In the beginning was the Word, and Word was with God and the Word was God... in him was life and the life was the light of all people... to all who received him, who believed in his name, he gave power to become children of God... And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory... full of grace and truth... The law was given through Moses; grace and truth came through Jesus Christ." Now I didn't read all of the words. But really, there's nothing in there about sin or salvation. Nothing. The theme of John's gospel is light and life, grace and truth.

Maryellen read today from chapter ten, where Jesus said, "I am the gate. Whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture." Jesus was not talking about saving people from sin. He was talking about saving them from danger, from those who would "steal, kill and destroy," those who would rob them of life. Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

That's one of my favorite verses in the Bible. Why don't people use that one to sum up the message of the gospel? "I have come that they may have life, and have it abundantly." And what *is* abundant life? Does it mean denying who you believe God created you to be? Does it mean conforming your identity to what other people think and expect of you?

We see a positive example of abundant life in the passage from Acts that Susan read this morning. It's a description of the earliest Christian community that sprang up after Pentecost, when Jesus' followers received the Holy Spirit. Large numbers of people responded to the Word of God and were baptized. And it says the new believers "devoted themselves to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers." And the result? It's what I would call abundant life: wonders and signs and a sense of awe, and radical sharing of possessions and money, food and time, with glad and generous hearts. Every day more people joined them, because they sensed the vitality and abundance of this community connected to the spirit of God. And they wanted to be part of it.

Now to be honest, this is the only time such a community is described in the New Testament, and the description is probably idealized. When the early church first started, people were expecting that Jesus would return to earth very soon, and the world would end as they knew it. So they didn't see much need for long-term planning. They could just give it all away, and everyone had enough. But eventually this community in Jerusalem ran out of resources and needed to be bailed out. The world didn't end, and they had to modify their way of life. Still, this gives us one picture of what abundant life might look like. It includes a sense of awe and wonder, and glad and generous hearts.

Those who live an abundant life are motivated by generosity and love, not fear. They don't condemn, but they draw others in and welcome them.

Wouldn't it be great if that was the kind of image Christians projected in the world today? Instead of being known for off-the-wall self-righteous judgments and exclusion, we could be known for being generous and joyful, understanding and caring.

Jesus called himself "the gate," but he also called himself "the good shepherd." A good shepherd knows the sheep by name, and takes special care of those who are weak or lingering on the edges of the flock, wandering or lost. He or she protects the sheep, offers a safe place where they can rest and flourish, without fear of being attacked. And as those who follow Jesus, we are to do the same. We are called to know and understand others, and take special care for those who are on the edges of society. We are to create a safe space where people can rest and be themselves, without fear of being judged or attacked. We live Jesus' promise of abundant life now**, whether they suffer from material deprivation, disease and infirmity, injustice and evil, or social alienation. Jesus said, "I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly."

Every good mother knows what that means. We strive to provide a safe place where our children can grow and flourish as the people God created them to be. And we rejoice when we see our children being generous and joyful, grateful and giving themselves. And that is Jesus' desire for all of us. May we follow in his way, and show the world the God we worship is a God of abundant life and love. In Jesus' name, Amen.

* "Senate Prayer Led by Hindu Elicits Protest," Associated Press, [The Washington Post](#), July 13, 2007.

** credit to David Lose, "Abundant Life Now," at www.workingpreacher.org, May 5, 2014.