

Lesson 2 (John 10:7-15)

**Devotional Meditation: The Good Shepherd and the Abundant Life**

*Rev. Stephen P. Greggo, PsyD*

There is a popular quote kicked around by motivational speakers. “Good, better, best, never let it rest until the good is better, and the better is best.” According to rather questionable and unauthenticated internet resources, this quote actually comes from St. Jerome, a Catholic priest, born in 347 A.D. and best known for his translation of the Bible into Latin (the Vulgate). I love the idea of attributing this pithy statement to a classic Christian Saint such as Jerome; but I can’t figure out the reason that Jerome would offer such a charge or why it can’t be found precisely in his writings. “Good, better, best, never let it rest until the good is better, and the better is best.” It is best to say many users but ‘author’ unknown. Nevertheless, let’s tie this uplifting charge to the beautiful promise that Jesus makes in John 10. How can the call to improve on the good and stay focused on offering the Lord our best in ways that connect to this promise?

*“The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.*

*I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”*

You will recall that our Gospel reading for last Lord’s Day was John 9 with its emphasis on Jesus being the Light of the World. He proves the truth of this statement when he brought light to the man blind from birth. In the second miracle, Jesus offers himself as the way to overcome spiritual blindness. Being physically healed by Jesus made this beggar better. Knowing Jesus as Lord is to trust in the promise that the best will last for all eternity. For the beggar this means that even when his better eyesight becomes a thing of the past, he will forever see the face of his Lord Jesus.

Next Sunday, (spoiler alert) our readings will take us to John 11 and the demonstration that Jesus is the best solution for death because he is the resurrection and the life. Let’s leave it to our next teacher to unpack that passage. Today we stop for a reflection on several verses from the chapter in-between, John 10 is where Jesus presents himself as the Good Shepherd. The central emphasis here is that Jesus Christ puts himself into sacrificial position to ensure that his sheep have access to the very best that life offers. He also introduces the idea of him being the gate or door. Most see this imagery as an indication that as the Good Shepherd, he stands in the gateway through the night guarding the way into the sheep pen. The message is profound and consistent with many other passages of Scripture.

*The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy.*

*I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.*

Jesus knows that the cross is ahead for him. He is laying down choice teaching about who he is and what he came to do. The essence of his message is that there are plenty of shepherds to follow who offer all kinds of incentives, promises and wild offers. The human appeal of leaders

for people to follow is part of the human experience. Only Jesus offers himself as the gate, not only to heaven beyond this life, but to a fuller, extraordinary sense of fulfillment in this life. He can make the good of life better, and empower us to enjoy a better pathway to our best future.

Unfortunately, it is far too easy to confuse the message here. In our day, to live the abundant life is to enjoy more stuff. The implication is that whatever our whim, we will be surrounded and pampered by excess stuff. Given that Jesus never seemed to own much beyond the cloak which soldiers would cast lots to possess, more stuff cannot possibly be his meaning.

Perhaps by abundant, he means more, status or prestige. Could this be the abundant life he promises? This line of reasoning does not seem likely given his meager manger birth and his dehumanizing death by crucifixion. Status does not appear to be on his important conditions list. Jesus seems only interested in being held in high regard by only one other person...His Heavenly Father.

Might abundant life mean less struggle, better health, and satisfying relationships? This would be certainly inviting and given his teaching in the beatitudes, parables, and thoughts on neighborly love, this seems plausible. Yet, his closest disciples did find themselves caught up in conflict and suffer for their faith. Life together in the body of Christ does seem to have its share of disruption, discouragement, and difficulties. Pastor Brehm would often point us to the symbol of the cross and this runs counter to pictures of health and wealth. What possibly could the Good Shepherd mean by this promise of abundant life?

It means that the Comforter will hold us and strengthen us to see the good that God is doing in life. The abundant life is being ready and able to offer praise and gratitude to the Creator who will return his blessing with the assurance of an eternity of rest in the best place possible: the presence of our Lord and Good Shepherd. He is standing at the Gate and is ready to show the Way.

My ministry over the past 27 years has been to train those heading into some form of ministry. Expectations of the seminary experience are high as many see the education and formation it provides as a sure means to a deeper walk with the Lord. The potential for Christian spiritual enrichment is built into the curriculum, the community, and in the experience but nothing is automatic or guaranteed. Those heading into ministry must grapple with the teaching of John 10 and Jesus offering himself as the Good Shepherd. The image of pastor comes from the etymology of an old English word...a pastor is a shepherd. The leader of a group of disciples of Christ through the everyday experience of living for the Lord is commonly tagged as a shepherd. In most generations, the sacrificial and self-effacing aspects of this link in imagery have been emphasized. Unfortunately, common sense and extensive evidence reveals that if a person in ministry does not engage in self-care, relational care, and spiritual care, it is impossible to sustain the energy or heart of compassion required for this office. It takes resiliency and balance to stay fresh in ministry. From another vantage point, the number of false shepherds, fallen shepherds, or thieving shepherds has harmed the view of followers who are skeptical and resistant to

committing to any shepherd. It is hard to dispute this trend based upon the plethora of case examples. The Shepherd picture of a pastor has fallen on hard times.

Jesus is inviting us to enjoy the privilege of him as our Good Shepherd. We may be surprised at the contentment that he supplies and the peace that his presence provides. Based upon his offer and words, we do need to seek him directly as our Good Shepherd and then turn ourselves to shepherd those around us in need of our care...children, parents, neighbors, students, co-workers, etc. In a church that takes seriously the priesthood of all believers, we all have shepherding responsibility and functions. May the Lord give us the grace to serve others in ways that reflect Jesus as the Good Shepherd.

The Lord helps us to take in the best that he has to offer as Good Shepherd by providing us with under-shepherds who challenge us to make our good better, and to never stop striving until we give the Lord our best. Pastor Brehm was one of those shepherds. Let's share together ways that we have been blessed over these many years during his extensive ministry. Or, you may share how you have been blessed by his family, his co-pastors. A common practice of our pastor was to encourage us to applaud and give thanks to God for his provision. This evening let's stop and express out loud our gratitude for the blessings that flowed from the Good Shepherd into our lives through this faithful and very human under-shepherd. *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.*