

## **An Abundant Life Reframed**

(Reflection by Rev. Peggy McDonagh, May 3, 2020)

This morning, I begin my reflection with a story. A little girl called Amy went to visit her grandmother in the country. Everything was going fine until Sunday. Amy's granny attended services at a rather severe church that kept the Sabbath by forbidding all work, all fun, and definitely all playing. A typical energetic six-year-old, Amy woke up on Sunday and started right off playing and laughing, immediately her grandmother rebuked her for breaking the Sabbath. Amy reluctantly quieted down, went to church, and later went for a walk to the barn. Inside the barn she discovered an old mule, a droopy-eyed, sad-faced, long-eared mule. Amy walked up to it and looked at it for a long while, his sad eyes watching her, and finally she said, "Mr. Mule, you look like you go to my grandmother's church!"

My friends, I was convinced to share this Easter season series with you because it celebrates life as six-year-old Amy experiences it. Since the virus struck, it appears as if the world reflects grandma's church and many of us may feel how the mule looks -- drooping head, ears and eyes, and with sadness in our hearts. We all need some brightness, hope, and joy. Hopefully the "Heart of the Matter" series is providing some of this hope and joy. Today's theme is "hearts overflowing with abundant life."

According to Wikipedia, 'abundant life,' within the Christian tradition refers to teachings about the fullness of life amid life's challenges. Abundant life reflects a "life in its abounding fullness of joy and strength for mind, body, and soul." The teachings suggest that feelings of lack, emptiness, and dissatisfaction indicate that a person has lost sight of or has become disconnected from what makes for a full, rich and satisfying experience of living: in other words, an abundant life.

The early Christians measured the fullness of life, not in terms of wealth, prestige, position, and power but rather by a sense of fulfillment arising from responsibility and self-giving, and

the gracious blessings that one experiences living and demonstrating God's love.

In Paul's letter to the church in Galatia, he identifies the source of abundant life as the Spirit of God and the fruits of the spirit. The fruits are joy, peace, longsuffering, gentleness, goodness, faith, and temperance. Those who have the Spirit of God experience the fullness of life through the joy and peace they feel arising from their actions of goodness, faithfulness, gentleness, and love. No matter the life challenges they had to face, and there were many, the Spirit of God within expressed outwardly through the fruits of the Spirit, sustained their strength, hope, and sense of security.

The theme scripture of this Easter Series shows the value the early Christians placed on supporting one another "abundantly," especially because many groups met in secret and in isolation. They shared meals, resources, prayers, kindness, concern, and the teachings of their leaders. Because many of the Christian communities had to gather in isolation and in secret, it was important for them to feel secure and safe and to trust their leaders. The community of John found this safety and security through the metaphor of Jesus as the Good shepherd.

Many of the early followers of Jesus would have been familiar with the description of the promised Messiah as a caring and skillful "shepherd." Hebrew prophets referred to God as the Good Shepherd, who sheltered and protected the people. The best-known reference of this metaphor is Psalm 23 which speaks of how the shepherd shields the sheep against the wild animals with his staff and rod.

In the ancient Middle Eastern world, the shepherd loved the sheep with a tangible and visible kind of love. At night the sheep were kept in a sheepfold, an open space with a circular stone wall and a small opening that had no closure. The shepherd would lead the sheep into the fold and become the door by lying down across the opening. No sheep could get in or out without disturbing the shepherd. Good shepherds protected and loved their sheep.

The Gospel of John uses this same metaphor for Jesus, identifying him as the Good Shepherd. Using this metaphor, the community leader teaches about Jesus' relationship with the community. The sheep knew well the voice of their shepherd and developed a sense of trust and care as they followed him. The shepherd and the sheep were one in love and trust.

The community knows the teachings and compassion of Jesus, and they have come to love and trust him. He is the Good Shepherd who protects, looking out for their best interests, and keeps them safe. I can imagine that the people felt a sense of security and safety, knowing that the Spirit of Jesus was protecting them.

In response, they endeavored to protect one another and to look out for the best interests of everyone in the community. They lived in a kind of unity that said, we are “in this together,” we are “of one mind.” The people understood that just as Jesus wanted them to experience abundant life, they must ensure that every person had life and had it abundantly. They believed that such unity, intimacy, and goodwill was what God required of them. They understood that abundant life for each occurred when all had abundant life.

Pre-CoVid 19, we lived in a world in which we had lost sight of what it means for everyone to “have life” and “have it abundantly.” We lost sight of being in this life together, of being ‘of one accord.’ Before the virus struck, for many of us in the Western world, the fullness of life was measured in terms of wealth, prestige, position, access to all the food we required, buying a home, having a good marriage or no marriage, raising healthy and happy children, being physically well, and so much more.

Then CoVid-19 entered our world, and it has treated all of us as equals. It has brought with it fear, isolation, suffering and death to all the world’s people no matter their income levels, race or the country in which they live. This pandemic has required us to redefine our notions of abundant life, and what the fullness of

life means for ourselves, for our countries, for the world's people, for the environment, and for creation.

What we now know, I believe, is that all the material stuff, our wants and desires, our expectations of what we deserve, and protections we created against others did not necessarily make for an abundant life. Despite all that people had many were dissatisfied, anxious, unhappy and frustrated. What did not make for abundance was all the rushing, stress, hurried, and tense reality we lived, never finding time to do the things we loved, wanted and needed such as valuing relationships, health, community, and the amazing wonders and joys of life.

The early Christians had it right. The fullness of life was knowing that God was protecting them and that they were self-giving, living and demonstrating God's love as they endeavored to honor the best interests for the community. I believe that we experience abundant life when we sense God with us in our day to day struggles and joys, and when the fruits of the Spirit's are expressed through our actions; actions of compassion, gentleness, kindness, understanding, acceptance of what we cannot change, perseverance, joy, peace of mind, and wisdom. Abundant life occurs when we allow our hearts to be broken in love for others, for justice, for peace, for creation, and worldwide unity. It is about walking without hurrying, living without tension, slowing down, seeing, and experiencing so much of what was missed. It is about spending valuable moments with ourselves and our families when we are able. No matter the life challenges we face an abundant life sustains our strength, hope, and sense of security.

CoVid-19 has taught us that the fullness of life occurs when "we are in this together." Together we ensure the fullness of life for everyone all over the world. Everyday worldwide, abundant life is experienced through all the new ways we are connecting, and giving, and loving, and reaching out.

We know that we cannot feed and clothe everyone or stop suffering and dying and change our world overnight. We cannot hug and be in our valued communities. We cannot be with loved

ones and friends in the ways we long to. We cannot support each other in ways that we so deeply wish to by being with each other in our times of need. But what we now know is that life's abundance occurs when we all do what we can from the heart of love.

Abundant life has less to do with what you do not have or what we cannot do now, and more to do with having a heightened awareness and appreciation for what we do have and what we can do. It is about every thought we think, word we speak, and the positive and creative things we do. What we all have is hearts that can overflow with love as we abide freely and fully in the spirit of God that is within and around us and continue to discover ways to share that love.

From "UNITY," a positive path for a spiritual living website I found these helpful affirmations that we can carry with us and say whenever we need encouragement:

I am established in the calm and poise of the Spirit.

I am centered in the dynamic spirit of tranquility.

I am refreshed, renewed, and at peace.

I am undisturbed by fear and doubt.

I live without rushing, hurry, or tension.

I let surges of joy and power flow through me.

I am a channel for the expression of the infinite love of God.

I am one with the One Great Heart that beats for all.

The love of God is within us all. May we generate God's love and allow it to overflow... for this is what makes for an abundant life.

Amen.