

10 *...I came that they may have life, and may have it abundantly.* (World English Bible)

This coming week our country observes what may be our most important national holiday. Who knows what it is? [Independence Day.] Is there a brave soul out there, young or old, who can tell us why we might say that July 4th is our most important holiday? So, help me here--WHO did we Americans declare our independence FROM? [The British.] So, we celebrate our independence from England on July 4th—if that is the case, do they have a July 4th in England? Yes they do--between the 3rd and the 5th--It's a joke and it went right over your heads

Why did people from England and other places in Europe come to America in the first place? [Answers might be religious freedom or autonomy or to make money or others.]

When independence was declared from England, one of the premises was that Americans have the right to seek happiness in their own individual way.

I understand that there is a Jewish proverb that says that God's people will answer to God for all the pleasures of life that we have failed to embrace. Isn't that an interesting thought?

I've been in the church since before I was born. I grew up Baptist, but many Christian groups--if not most--don't seem to subscribe to the idea that pleasure is a good thing--in fact, the idea that we will answer for those things we deny ourselves is just downright foreign, wouldn't you say?

A few years after the death and resurrection of Jesus, the Greek idea that the flesh is evil and the spirit is good was king of all thought. Within just a few years of Jesus' ministry, physical self-denial and even self-abuse was held in high esteem. Religious hermits and monks were revered. Some monastic orders began to require absolute silence. Some required self-flagellation--using a whip to beat oneself as a way to seek separation of flesh and spirit--a way to beat back the flesh. Before long, sexuality, even in marriage, was seen as inherently evil. Celibacy became the standard for anyone who truly wanted to be spiritual and before long it was a requirement for the clergy--a standard that still exists for Catholics.

That track was not altered much over the years. Some groups require fasting. Some separate themselves from the rest of the world--shunning the world around them. Many Christians take on a position of anti-pleasure or at least pro self-denial.

In our quest for spirituality I wonder if we've taken up the physical standards of John the Baptist. If you remember, he wore strange scratchy clothing (like mine?) and he didn't eat and drink what others did. Through the years, some groups have followed his example in fasting or not eating or drinking certain things. I tend to see John the Baptist as a peculiar man--a man who caused a stir everywhere he went because of his dress and his serious demeanor. He ate differently, when he ate at all. He wore animal skins. He was different--it was easy to see that he was physically, externally different.. Clearly, he was also spiritually different but that is a discussion for another day.

Sometimes I think that in our Christian quest we have settled. You've heard me remind us--and you will certainly hear it again because it is one of my themes--that Jesus told his disciples that the world will know that we are his because of our love for one another and for the world. In doing so we would be showing our INTERNAL difference from the world--but through the years, Christians have corporately failed at that and instead have settled for showing the world that we are EXTERNALLY

different from them.

Maybe by our dress. Maybe by shunning those we consider unworthy. By denying ourselves certain pleasures because, well we don't know why. By our holy language and our holier-than-thou attitudes. I think the church in general stands out for what we don't do not what we do--not what we accomplish. Can you think of a group in the New Testament who stood above the rest of their world and congratulated themselves for what they didn't do and how they kept the rules? [Pharisees]

Who can tell me what the word "Christian" stands for? [Little Christ's.] We are not little John the Baptists or little Paul's or little Pharisees.

If we are little Christ's--who are we to mirror? [Christ.]

A few years ago, the whole "what would Jesus do?" craze was popular--with tee shirts and bumper stickers and jewelry--but the reality is that I was taught all my life to use that question to decide how to act in the moment. Asking that question is actually a great idea, but I think my personal mistake has been always limiting the idea to the negative. "Would Jesus use that word?" or "Would Jesus drive be drag-racing?" or "Would Jesus cut in line?"

I think it is a mistake to only ask what Jesus wouldn't do--I think we should also ask what WOULD he be doing. He would be living the abundant life--no doubt about it. Let me note that the word translated "abundant" means overflowing and pressed down--you might say more than one can imagine.

Certainly there is a spiritual component to the abundant life. As Christians, we are brothers and sisters of Jesus the Christ. We are children of the living God. We have an eternal relationship with them. We often think of heaven and of future, but that relationship is also in the here and now through the Holy Spirit who was sent to be guide and teacher and empower-er. You and I have spiritual work to do and we have a spiritual relationship to nurture and to pursue.

BUT I don't believe that the abundant life is all spiritual. When God finished with all of creation--from the sun to the moon to the earth and the creatures and human beings--when the Garden of Eden was all complete--God looked over his handiwork, over his creation and what did he see? [He saw that it was very good.]

So, what would this "abundant life" Jesus lived look like--what WOULD Jesus be doing? Jesus would be living life with joy. Jesus would be celebrating creation. His ability to celebrate got him into trouble, didn't it? It created a bad reputation in some circles. His willingness to celebrate life in the company of "undesirables" was a concern for some. Matthew 9:9-13 says Jesus called Matthew, A TAX COLLECTOR, to follow him and that later, when he and his disciples were seen reclining at a table eating with tax-gatherers and sinners, the Pharisees were quite upset with the company he was keeping.

In Matthew 9:14-15, we find that even John the Baptist was confused by what he saw and heard. Jesus wasn't acting as John expected. In Matthew 11:18-19 we see that Jesus was accused of being a friend to sinners and being a glutton and a drunkard. Instead of fasting, he was living the abundant life in the here and now.

At a time when children were mostly important for the sake of their future contributions--Jesus touched them and held them and even held them up as examples for how to be in the world and how to experience faith. In John 2:1-10 we see that the occasion of his first known miracle was when Jesus

made sure that a special occasion--a wedding--wasn't ruined because the wine was running out. If we look closely, I believe that we can see a theme in Jesus' life on earth--one of celebrating that what God created is good and worthy. I see joy and abundance in the way he lived and the way he saw the world around him.

In the way he honored and loved the unlovable--the common people. In the way he treated those who were "less than" and in the way he healed the sick--sometimes those who were literally untouchable. I see abundance in the way he spoke to and respected women--he even had an unheard of theological discussion with the "woman at the well" who was not only a woman but a Samaritan [John 4:4ff]. He even honored the Samaritans with a positive parable--in the parable of the man who was robbed and stripped and left for dead--you all know who his neighbor was, don't you? Was it the priest? No. Was it the Rabbi? No. Who WAS his neighbor? [Samaritan.] When Jesus cleared out the temple of cheaters and thieves--I believe it was a three-fold act. He was getting rid of the riff-raff of course, but also he was standing up for those who had no recourse and no voice--the travelers who were being cheated in the changing of money and the buying of blemished animals. I also believe that the money changers had taken over the court of women and gentiles--again, those who had no voice--and he was restoring their ability to come and worship.

I believe that Jesus lived the abundant life because of his closeness to God and to God's good creation. He believed in experiencing life in all its joy and pleasure. I think this was because he saw the hand of God all around him. He was aware of the Father in all he did and all he said and all he was--in the life he lived moment to moment. Part of his ability to live the abundant life was his awareness of God in everything around him.

Jesus saw that women and Samaritans were created by the hand of God and that God sees no difference between the races or the sexes. Created in the image of God means just that. He saw the purity of children. It seems that after we have been in the world for a few years we get polluted by wrong ideas and prejudices. Children act fully and live fully and believe fully...so much so that Jesus says we must be as they are to see the kingdom of God.

Over the last few days, I've thought a lot about what Jesus might do if he was living in the here and now. I'm going to go out on a limb and tell you some things I've been thinking--some of these ideas are pretty scriptural and some are a bit of a stretch, but here you go:

Jesus would laugh the longest and the loudest if you told a joke. If you had a baptismal service outside--at the lake or the river--on a hot day, Jesus would probably go swimming when it was over. If he went to a pig-picking or an oyster roast he would probably stay long enough to get that LAST bite. Jesus would dance until the band was too tired to play. He would arm wrestle you or play rock/paper/scissors at a moment's notice and probably laugh about it if he won. He would love his friends so much that NOTHING they did could destroy their friendship--he would forgive any wrong, either real or imagined. He would fall on his face and cry over the wrongs in the world--deep wracking sobs--then he would get up and figure a way to right those wrongs. He would also shed bitter tears over those who rejected him then he would try to win them any way possible--NEVER giving up. If you put Jesus in your boat I think he would hang his feet overboard. At the ocean he would chase the waves and run back as the waves chased him. He would marvel as he watched the gulls and the pelicans--though he knows perfectly well how they fly. He would probably plant flowers instead of vegetables--but if he DID plant vegetables, he would surely give them all away.

He would be living life in joy and in abundance--pressed down and overflowing.

As we come to a time of celebration of our independence and as we celebrate our liberty and our right to pursue happiness, I encourage each of you to remember to live the abundant life this week.

Hug more kids. Kiss your spouse at every opportunity. Pet some dogs. Talk to a stranger. Meet a need in someone's life. Watch the sunset and then stay out long enough to marvel at the fireflies. Tell a joke and laugh for all you are worth. Remember to laugh at yourself if you take yourself too seriously. Laugh at others when THEY take themselves too seriously. Cry if someone hurts your feelings and then forgive them and get over it. Yell if you skin your knuckle or hit your finger. Invite an unpopular person to your 4th of July celebration--and then treat them like they are special. Touch someone no one else wants to touch. Find a dollar and give it away to someone who needs it more. When the music is good, remember to dance--and dance like no one is watching.

All this is possible if we see the physical world through the eyes of Jesus--through the eyes of The Creator.

What would Jesus do? He would see the good in everyone and he would forgive the bad parts. He would live life--not as a stick-in-the-mud but one who knows the author and the finisher of the story.

Jesus would eat with anyone. He ate with those who had repented. He ate with those who hadn't yet repented. He ate with those who were not going to repent. Unlike some of us, he didn't require them to change first and be acceptable. He met them and loved them where they were. He loved them so much and forgave so much and extended so much grace that he violated the laws of his religion. For the sake of human beings, he accepted the unacceptable and it changed many of them--and he created a revolution that is still happening.

China's Chairman Mao once said that a revolution is not a dinner party. Jesus disagrees and we celebrate Jesus' revolution here every Sunday with a dinner party--with communion. His table is the largest in the world--one supper on a table 25 thousand miles long. No sackcloth and ashes--a celebration and not a funeral.

If you don't know Jesus today, come and join his revolution. If you do, remember that there is heaven to come but even today, we can live as Jesus did--doing what he would do--living the abundant life, life pressed down and overflowing.

If you and I live life abundantly it as he did, we will create our own revolution--a Christian revolution--today.