

September 13, 2009 – What is it like to be fully alive?

This morning we are beginning a new sermon series about being fully alive. I think there is something in each of us that wants to be vibrantly alive - We want to be alive in our relationships and families, alive in our vocational or academic pursuits, and particularly we want to be fully alive in our spiritual life. I'm guessing that for one reason or another, that's why you're here at church this morning.

In John 10:10, we hear this pointed statement from Jesus: *The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.* Over the next few weeks we're going to look at what it is like to be fully alive in Jesus. This is a subject I love talking about, because we have a deep passion to see people fully alive in Jesus - that's why we responded to God's call to move to Mankato and start this church 4 years ago. We passionately want to see people connect with Jesus and find their way into the fullness of life that He has made available to each of us.

Let me share two prayers I have been praying for our time this morning, and then we'll get deeper into our main passage from the Bible. My first prayer is this: that wherever you are at right now in your spiritual journey that you'd be able to walk into a greater and greater experience of that kind of life with Jesus. You might be just starting to investigate what faith in Jesus is all about, or seeing if being connected with faith and/or church can make a difference in your life. Or maybe you've been in church your whole life and trying to follow Jesus for decades. And there are tons of places in-between those. Whatever the case, the experience of being fully alive in Jesus is available to all of us.

My second prayer has to do with the reality of spiritual battle that goes on over finding full and abundant life. As Jesus states so directly... the thief only wants to steal, kill and destroy things. Ultimately who Jesus is referring to is the enemy of our souls, Satan. The enemy wants to reek havoc in your life and do everything he can to keep you from the abundant life of Jesus. And sometimes the times you will feel that battle most acutely is when you just begin to take steps towards Jesus. If the enemy can get you all discouraged and beat up before we even get started, he's been successful in his mission to steal, kill and destroy life. The good news is that we don't have to fear the enemy... Jesus' power to give us full and abundant life is so much stronger, but we do need to hang in there with Christ in the midst of the battle. Along those lines – let's pray for those two things right now before we go any farther. PRAY

As we continue on in this series, we'll touch on a number of aspects about what it means to be fully alive in Jesus – for today, I'd like to read some more from the larger passage in John 10 where Jesus talks about this full abundant life. We'll actually take a peek at two different instances in different settings where Jesus gives the same message and basic points. Here's the first part from John 10:7-15

*"I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. **8** All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. **9** I am the gate; whoever enters through me will be saved. He will come in and go out, and find pasture. **10** The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy; I have come that they may have life, and have it to the full.*

***11**"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. **12** The hired hand is not the shepherd who owns the sheep. So when he sees the wolf coming, he abandons the sheep and runs away. Then the wolf attacks the flock and scatters it.*

13 The man runs away because he is a hired hand and cares nothing for the sheep. **14** "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me — **15** just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep.

Skip ahead to verse 22. (10:22-30) **22** Then came the Feast of Dedication at Jerusalem. It was winter, **23** and Jesus was in the temple area walking in Solomon's Colonnade. **24** The Jews gathered around him, saying, "How long will you keep us in suspense? If you are the Christ, tell us plainly." **25** Jesus answered, "I did tell you, but you do not believe. The miracles I do in my Father's name speak for me, **26** but you do not believe because you are not my sheep. **27** My sheep listen to my voice; I know them, and they follow me. **28** I give them eternal life, and they shall never perish; no one can snatch them out of my hand. **29** My Father, who has given them to me, is greater than all; no one can snatch them out of my Father's hand. **30** I and the Father are one."

On both occasions, Jesus is using this sheep/shepherd metaphor, driving home what it is like to be in rich relationship with him. And in these two passages, Jesus points to three things that seem to be a part of this full and abundant life he offers... His most succinct statement about this comes in verse 27 where he says this: "My sheep listen to my voice, I know them, and they follow me."

Being fully alive in/through Jesus is not limited to these three things, but it certainly does include these very important pieces. Let's spend the rest of our time looking at each of those more closely.

First Jesus says that "My sheep listen to my voice." Being fully alive, living the abundant life we long to live comes by interacting with Jesus. When you think of it, this is the core of what it means to be a Christian...actual relationship, real interaction with Jesus.

Four times in this chapter Jesus speaks of this interaction that he has as the good shepherd with his sheep. He speaks and we know his voice. Isn't that something that you're hungry for – to have this kind of interaction with Jesus? Now that doesn't mean we hear God audibly speaking to us... I suppose it can mean that, but for most people it tends to be more internal than that... to illustrate that, let me share a couple of stories from my life and Andrea's. I'll start with Andrea's story.

A significant point in Andrea's spiritual journey happened when she was 15 and at a summer camp. One of the main sessions at the camp was about prayer. Specifically the speaker was talking about the importance of listening in prayer... that when we pray, it should be as much about listening to God as it is about talking to God. After the message, the campers were sent out on an assignment... to simply practice what they had just been taught. So, Andrea went outside, found a log to sit on, and started in praying... She took a few minutes, maybe 3 or 5 minutes, talking to God about a number of things. And then when that time period was over, she stopped talking and switched over to listening. She did that back and forth for a total of 30 minutes. Talking, then listening, talking then listening, etc.

In that first exchange, Andrea didn't really "hear" anything profound... it was more of a general sense of God's presence – that he was there and interacting with her, even if it didn't come out in words. But after the camp, Andrea kept pursuing this really specific discipline of taking an equal amount of time to listen as she was praying out loud, even using a watch to keep track. Over time, two things began to happen: 1) she did begin to feel like there were some things that God might be speaking, but she wasn't sure if they were God or not (anyone ever struggle with that one before?)

2) After about 3 weeks of doing this every day, trying to weigh out what was God speaking to her and what was just her thoughts, she felt like she began to understand the difference.

This makes sense even in our interpersonal relationships, doesn't it? When we first become friends with someone and they call us up on the phone, we don't know who it is right away. But after awhile, after you have heard that person's voice enough... you pick up the phone (and even without caller ID) you can tell who it is – just by hearing their voice. I think it is a lot that way with God as well... the more we give ourselves to the discipline of listening, the more we will begin to discern what is God speaking and what is just us.

One part of my story is how I came to experience God speaking through the Bible. I grew up in the Lutheran church and had plenty of exposure to the Bible through those formative years. During that time, I knew that reading the Bible was a good thing, and even that the Bible had good wisdom to live by. But then when I was about 18, God began to open up an added interactive quality that I could experience with Jesus in reading the Bible.

In that season, I started to see the Bible not just a book of truth and theology about God, but also as a means by which I could interact WITH God. I found myself praying before I cracked open the Bible, asking God to speak to me in the midst of my reading.... both so I could learn something from what I read, but also, just so I could be with God, to experience relationship with Him while I was reading the Bible.

Now, coming to church and hearing that it's a good idea to pray and/or read the Bible is probably not a new thing... but the point I am driving home is broader and deeper than that. Things like Bible reading and prayer – pursuits we call spiritual disciplines – those are all tools to help us foster interaction with God, with Jesus. Besides Bible reading and prayer, there are number of other spiritual disciplines Christians have pursued... things like fasting, solitude and silence, simplicity, worship and a bunch more.

Again, the whole point of these is not to do them just to be religious, to cross off some "Christian duty" box on your list – No... the point of those pursuits is to have actual relationship with God, to interact with Jesus in an authentic and genuine manner.

As we finish this portion of the message – here is a question you can ask yourself. If real exchange with Jesus is part of this full and abundant life we are seeking - What habits am I developing to foster interaction with Jesus?

Here's the second thing Jesus says in John 10:27. He said, "I know them" Full and abundant life comes through Intimacy with Jesus. A deep desire for each of us is to experience being loved to the core. In essence, this is what marriage and family and friendship is meant to be... to know and to be known, right? I think it is also very true about what vibrant spirituality, of what being fully alive in Jesus is meant to be. Let me re-read a few verses from earlier in John 10 where Jesus talks about this: verse 14-15...

***14** "I am the good shepherd; I know my sheep and my sheep know me — **15** just as the Father knows me and I know the Father—and I lay down my life for the sheep.*

Talk about a mind-blowing concept.... That we would be known and in relationship with Jesus the same way that He and God the Father know and love one another. For a number of us, that might not only be mind-blowing, but it might seem totally out of reach. It can be a struggle to grasp that God could know us that deeply and intimately, and that He would want to. It is so common today for people to have gone through significant relational hurts in their past – could be from an absent or abusive parent,, could be through a divorce that either you experienced as a child or yourself as an adult, could be from a close friendship that faded away or so many other things. In any case, our past experiences of broken intimacy can make it difficult at times to believe that we can experience that closeness with God.

But we can – and that is a huge part of what Jesus wants to offer us in this full and abundant life He is talking about. Jesus wants to walk you through that fear towards trust. Jesus wants to lift off the condemnation you might feel and lead you towards an amazing experience of acceptance in Him. This can sound so trite, but what we tell our kids is so true for us as well... Jesus wants to be your best friend. Not just in some symbolic representation, but in a real and living relationship, where He knows you and you know Him, where there is a real exchange of loving Christ and Him loving you at the core of who you are.

I was thinking again this week, that this is the piece that helps us most in getting through hard times... it's not just that God is sovereign and that he works everything for good for those who believe him. Etc... etc

That's all true and hold onto that for all your worth... but here's the other piece that I have found even more powerful in difficult times for me ... the on-going sense that Jesus knows me - He knows and cares what I am going through. Folks - that is true for you. He wants to walk you through life, as a good shepherd, leading you into a deeper connection with Him and guiding you through life along the way.

So I gave you a question to think about with the first point: here's another question for you to ask yourself: What obstacles need to be cleared away so I can experience a deeper level of intimacy with Jesus? For a number of you, those obstacles might be those healing pieces that God wants to do in your life – freeing you from past hurt, from fear, from condemnation or shame.

If that's the case, be encouraged... Jesus is so eager to bring you that healing that you're looking for. And then for others of us, those obstacles might be more about just making space in our lives to let Jesus love on us – we might be so busy doing other things that there is just not time to experience Jesus knowing us deeply. Again, what obstacles need to be cleared away so you can experience a deeper level of intimacy with Jesus?

Here's the third piece that Jesus says in John 10:27. He says: "They follow me – My sheep follow me" Entering into this full and abundant life includes Involvement with Jesus... or maybe another word to use there is Engagement with Jesus... engaging with Jesus in the things that He is doing. He leads... we follow. We go where He goes. We do what He is doing. We model ourselves after him. We get involved with the mission of Jesus.

Earlier in the gospel of John... back in chapter 5, Jesus was getting some serious flack from the Pharisees about healing a man on the Sabbath day. In Verse **19** *Jesus gave them this answer: "I tell you the truth, the Son can do nothing by himself; he can do only what he sees his Father doing, because whatever the Father does the Son also does."*

There is something about full and abundant life that only comes as we join the mission of God, to do as Jesus describes... to join the Father in what He's already doing. You see this stuff about full and abundant life is not just about us. It's not some Christian self-promotion plan to "live the good life." It's about being truly and vibrantly alive.

And I don't think that can happen if you're missing any of the parts we're talking about... being fully alive has this component of real interaction with Jesus, real relationship with the Son of God that came to die and save us from our sins. Being fully alive means experiencing this oneness, this intimacy, this deep connection of being known by Christ, and knowing him back. AND... being fully alive has a component of joining Christ in his work to spread this real and eternal life to all the world, starting in our backyards.

Recently, I was recalling some stories from the early days of when Vineyard churches were first getting started in the 70's and early 80's. A big part of that initial movement was this prophetic call: "Jesus wants His church back!" Jesus wants His church back!" It is so easy to get our roles mixed up in this Christianity stuff... we can think that we're the ones in charge and that God or Jesus is just around to help us achieve our goals. No – again... he's the good shepherd, we're the sheep. We get the privilege of joining Christ in his work to love and redeem the world... but it's always His mission first. We just get to come along and participate.

I'm asking lots of questions today... so here's one more for you to ask yourself: What is Jesus doing in/around me right now that I need to follow Him into? What ways is Jesus working around you to bring His love, his compassion, his truth, his power to others? And how is calling out to you... like John 10:27 says to follow Him where He's going. If you've been around Two Rivers awhile, you've likely heard me quote pastor Steve Nicholson who says: "The heart and the soul of the Christian life is learning to hear the voice of God, and then developing the courage to do what He tells you." If that doesn't fit with today's topic, I don't know what else does. Jesus speaks – we listen. He leads – we follow.

Let me share one final piece and then we'll go back into a time of singing in worship and some prayer ministry. Again beginning in verse 7, Jesus says: *"I tell you the truth, I am the gate for the sheep. 8 All who ever came before me were thieves and robbers, but the sheep did not listen to them. 9 I am the gate: whoever enters through me will be saved.*

There are likely a bunch of things we can pull from those verses, but here's the main and the plain: Jesus is the gate, he's the entry point for us to walk into this full and abundant life we desire. Everything we've talked about today – it's all about Jesus. Interaction with Jesus, Intimacy with Jesus, Involvement and Engagement with Jesus in his mission. It's all about HIM.

Once again, this morning – my prayer is that wherever you have been spiritually, wherever you are at right now this morning, that you will find courage rising in your heart to believe Jesus about what He's saying here in John 10. He has real and full and abundant life for you, and He is eager to walk you into a vibrant experience of that in Him. Let's pray.