

I am not going to lie to you. I had a tough time with this text. For starters, I gave Anna the title a month ago and in a cursory glance, I decided it was all about sheep, strangers and gates and what they had to say about salvation. I'm not so keen on admitting I was a bit wide of the mark: I'm not at all sure that this is a text primarily about salvation.

Moreover, there is such an abundance of sloppy, bad interpretation of this text that teasing out what actually *is* its meaning was a bit of a challenge. But in the end, I found a word on which I could dwell, on which I hope we all may dwell, in Jesus' teaching about abundant life.

What is abundant life? Have you ever given much thought to that? What defines abundance? Is it possessions? I read an article recently that suggested that no, happiness doesn't seem to measure any higher above a certain threshold of income. Interestingly, the article did acknowledge that money stresses in lower income families might indeed detract from happiness, which makes perfect sense. But above a certain threshold, having more money or possessions didn't add measurably to one's happiness.

Of course, this line of thinking takes the idea of abundance far too literally. Abundant life is measured in far more than abundance of stuff or money. But again, what exactly is abundant life?

Jesus doesn't define his terms. He teaches plenty, but we're meant to pick up some things by watching him. To be sure, elsewhere in the gospels, he speaks of eternal life, which seems easier to understand than abundant life.

But how do you answer? What would mark an abundant life for you?

This passage from John is unusual because it is parable-like. Parables were the communication pattern of the other Gospels. It is unusual for Jesus to speak in this way in John. Our lesson is sandwiched between two stories of altercations between Jesus and powerful interests – religious interests. The bookends on either side of this story involve stones and a powerful impulse to throw them.

Let's look at what the text doesn't say.

Scholars say that the compulsion to turn this story into an allegory must be resisted. So, I won't be saying today that the shepherd represents: X and the strangers: Y and the gates: Z. The problem with analogies and allegories is when pressed, they ultimately break down. But it is instructive that in between two near death experiences where Jesus ran up against those who had strong ideas about what the good life looks like and how it is achieved, Jesus mused somewhat poetically about good shepherds and their opposite and concluded that he came that we might have life and have it abundantly.

It would be very easy to let this text take on an anti-Semitic tone. Jesus was at odds with the religious figures of his day, those figures happened to be Jewish and so many interpretive leaps have been made through the years that frankly missed the point. The point isn't the conflict between Jesus and his fellow Jews. The point is the conflict between the life abundant that Jesus offers, and all of the other alternatives.

Mind you, this text is not about how to live your best life now. The text is, however, about the reality that there are life-giving paths and life-depleting paths, and which gate we go through has profound impact.

It would also be very, very easy to make the claim that our group is the group that represents what Jesus calls for from us and that our fold is the right fold and that if one

truly follows Jesus, one will end up in our sheep pen. It would be very, very easy. But it would be wrong. Great humility is called for when we seek to make declarations about the will of Jesus Christ. Abundant life is surely achieved by aligning our wills with that of Jesus, but treacherous territory lies in assuming the will of Jesus to aligned with ours! But the problem with all of these admonitions: to avoid allegory, to resist declaring the rightness of our fold, to demur on what makes the abundant life, is that when taken all together, these admonitions can be crippling!

Sure, we want to be certain that we don't express an exclusive claim on the truth of the gospel. That would be hubris. But the text does have to say something!

And so again, I return to this idea of the abundant life.

Again, I return to the idea that who we follow *does* matter, and *how* we follow matters as well.

To be perfectly frank, I am not so keen on the sheep analogy. It has become something of a commonplace for preachers to beat up on the sheep when it comes to discipleship. It is something of old chestnut to talk about how the sheep are dumb, how they graze along largely oblivious to what is going on around them and it takes something or someone to move the sheep where they need to be. These are old analogies, regularly preached, and I find myself wondering whether or not many of us in our urban contexts find much meaning in the analogy. For many years, I did not. I didn't grow up on a farm. I've never sheared a sheep. My closest encounter with the agrarian lifestyle was to realize that wet wool stinks when I got caught in the rain in a sweater.

But then I spent time in Scotland. To spend time in Scotland is to encounter sheep. And let me tell you, I now understand all of those tired old analogies. I had this epiphany that

they were on to something when I was driving on a single-track road through the Megernie Estate and I had to park the car and get out to shoo the sheep off of the road. I hate to admit that I join the cacophony, but sheep are dumb. They do graze around mindlessly and aimlessly, and hey, if you're a sheep, with nothing else to do but graze, what point is there in seeking direction? And I add, there is no more sure way to provoke a sheep stampede than to attempt to get a picture of one. Try to get them out from in front of the car? They stand stock-still. Try to get a picture, then they're off to the races.

There is no predictability about anything sheep related other than that they will eat and they will attend to other bodily functions, and generally the latter where you are walking. I don't care for the sheep analogy because I don't want to see myself in that light! But an honest read of this text is a humbling read, because it requires us to acknowledge that there are paths that are awfully easy to wind up following, that the good shepherd does indeed offer life abundant, but that there are plenty of alternate claims for our attention.

Jesus wants it to be clear that his followers *follow him*. There are others who would drag our allegiance and our attention in other directions, to other sheepfolds, if you will, but that the sheep recognize the shepherd's voice and follow. And in that following lies the life abundant that Jesus promises.

At the end of the day, I suppose the best message from this text is the simplest message, that the sheep follow the shepherd.

I don't like the analogy of sheep for followers of Jesus Christ, but it is probably an apt one. If I'm honest, if we're all honest, the difference is really only degrees. And I suspect its meaning was not lost on Jesus' early followers.

There is an old hymn that claims that the call of the Christian is to trust and obey. The refrain of the hymn goes like this: "Trust and obey, for there's no other way to be happy in Jesus, but to trust and obey."

It's a bit syrupy, and there are a lot of things that I'd just as soon not trust or obey. There were things I received as truth that needed skepticism and disobedience. But to follow Jesus... I find myself wondering again if that isn't the heart of the life abundant that Jesus promises.

There are plenty of alternate claims on our lives that deserve far more skepticism. There are plenty of bandits, to borrow the term from John, whose function is not to lead us to the abundant life that Jesus wishes for us. But the call of this text is for us to listen for the voice of the good shepherd and to follow.

Following Jesus will reorient our priorities in what we value.

This claim won't be particularly helpful for us, though, if it is long on theory and short on practice. It's easy, indeed it is pietistic, to claim that there is happiness in following Jesus, trusting and obeying, as it were, without any clear guidance as to what that means. And the irony of it all is that to follow Jesus is not to make a claim of assent to a set of morals. It is not to feast on a steady diet of doctrine. Indeed, Joe Small, in his excellent book, The Preservation of the Truth, makes the bold claim that the truth isn't a set of beliefs or right worship, rather the truth is the person of Jesus!

To follow the good shepherd then is to follow the person of Jesus, who taught us what it is to live faithfully through his living.

The abundant life, then, is a life of generosity of spirit, of bearing burdens with the poor and the sick, of praying for our enemies and forgiving those who persecute us. The abundant life is rather the opposite of how most of us define abundance.

No wonder there are so many counterclaims.

Fred Craddock tells a wonderful story about a missionary family who were in China around the time of the Maoist revolution. They made no attempt to escape before the change of power and the end result was they were detained indefinitely. Through the intervention of friends, eventually a visa was secured for them. As they were preparing to depart China to return home, an order was issued that they could carry with them only a portion of their possessions, determined by weight. I can't remember the weight, but it was a meager amount. And so the couple painstakingly went through their household to determine what was of such value that it should be carried. The aged aunt's vase with its sentimental value or the functional and necessary typewriter? Piece by piece value was assigned and selections were made. On the day of the departure, as the couple and their children went down to the dock, the authorities weighed all of their goods and found they were down to the n'th degree. Just as they were about to board the boat, the official asked, "Have you weighed the children?"

All of the sudden it was all rubbish.

But that's an easy one... who wouldn't leave the typewriter for the child?

But there are much more subtle claims to our loyalty... the glaring choices are easy to make. It's the little ones that require us to be grounded in the abundant life. When it comes down to it, what do we trust and obey? Who do we follow?

The call to abundant life is to recognize our sheepish limitations and to trust the good shepherd so that in what we value we will assign the right weight to things.

Perhaps I have oversimplified the text. But it seems to me that if we are going to make a claim as we have today that we will stand with Amy and Brad as they raise Madelyn in the faith, we need to know where our priorities lie. We need to order our lives such that we are worthy guides for her because *we* have followed the right guide.

So, seeking the abundant life, we're not so concerned about whether we've got everything worked out intellectually or even if we're always right in what we do. The truth is our intellect is limited and we're not always right. But our faith isn't in our intellects or our activities; our faith is in a person. Following that person, following the good shepherd isn't always the easiest thing or even surest thing. But it is the way to life abundant. And it is the way to joy.

In the name of the Father and of the Son, and of the Holy Ghost, Amen.