

Sunday, April 13th, 2008
The 4th Sunday of Easter

Acts 2:42-47, John 10:1-10
Define "Abundant Life"

The most romanticized aspect of church history is the early church. For some strange reason, people seem to want to go back to those times over and over again. Some folks feel that the church, any church, has gotten too far away from what Christ would have wanted, or from what Christ called us to be.

Usually, part of the draw to the early church is exactly what Luke writes about in today's lesson from Acts. And to be honest, as a pastor, it sounds wonderful. And beyond that, as a human being it sounds wonderful. A community that takes care of its own, a community that is willing to give of itself, a community that nurtures each other sounds wonderful, doesn't it? A community that spends its time devoted to prayer, to care for each other, to the breaking of bread, and the praise of God.

Pastors love that stuff. And to be honest, so do human beings. We all complain about how bad the world has gotten. We wonder how people can do what they do – how one Marine can murder another Marine and her unborn child, how one person can beat their child, or another can destroy themselves and those around them with addictions to drugs and other substances. We wonder how nation can do what they do to nation, how families do what they do to one another, and how people, just plain old people, are as bad to one another as they are.

So perhaps it isn't too surprising that in the early 1800's, right after the Revolutionary War and the war of 1812, right in the middle of the debates about slavery, there sprung up many religious groups that wanted to go back to the days that Luke describes in the book of Acts. It isn't too surprising that many churches and groups are trying to get back to what Luke describes today. In the middle of war, of economic struggles, in the middle of doubt, and broken homes, in the middle of disease and hunger, in the middle of this much sectarian virus, why wouldn't people want to get back to the Acts vision of the church?

One of the places that some of these groups go back to is this passage in John. After all, it keeps things simple. When Jesus says he is the way the truth and the life, and this is simple, this is how it should be, it draws the connection between the good life that should be and what the church should be. Quickly we draw the connection between what should be and what is – and the connection between how the world would be if we got back to the basics of accepting Jesus Christ as the way the truth and the life we would get back to the vision of community, in Acts, and the problems of the world would go away.

I happen to believe this is the wrong part of the passage to pay attention to if you want to keep things simple. We've been arguing for 2000 years what it means for Jesus to be the way, the truth and the life, and if anything, the church is more fragmented than at any other point in history. Instead, what if we take that Jesus comes so that we may have life, and life abundantly as the pivotal

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phrase? Jesus contrasts himself with those who bring death and destruction, but I think we have all too often mistaken his promise of abundant life to be either a promise of abundant stuff, like the boxes still sitting unopened and packed up tightly in our home that we haven't touched since we got here, or of the easy life, wherein we have no troubles, not problems and all is hunky dory, which, to be completely honest, doesn't fit the life of Christ or the life of any Christian I have ever met.

So what is abundant life if it isn't abundant stuff or the easy life? Perhaps we find the answer in my definition of home – that place where I can make it to the bathroom in the middle of the night without having to turn on the lights. That place where the sounds of "Hello, daddy!" echo wildly, and that place that may be chaotic, but is my retreat. Is it the good life? I don't know. Is there sometimes evidence of much too abundant life? You bet. Would I trade it for all the tea in China? Not on your life.

Is this abundant life? Perhaps for me. Probably not for you. I would be not for the majority of the world's population. But Christ is not one size fits all – while he is the way the truth and life, he comes to a flock of sheep who are not all the same, and this shepherd comes that we may all have abundant life. What does that look like for you?