

**Christ Presbyterian Church
Edina, Minnesota
November 1 & 2, 2014
John Crosby
Abundance of Life
John 10:10**

I was working on this sermon yesterday morning at Starbucks and a friend of mine, Steve, not from church, he doesn't know me as his pastor, was there. We were giving each other a hard time. He goes, "How's it going?" "All right. It's just slow." He puts his stuff together. He is just leaving Starbucks and he turns to me and says, "Oh, yeah, yeah. Hey, what are you lecturing about?" That's never a good sign. "What are you lecturing about?" I said something to myself and mumbled something else. "It's about how to live an abundant life." I could tell we were not communicating.

The abundant life is a phrase out of the Bible that clearly Steve didn't get, "Oh, good life. Yeah, man. Hey, I've got a great life. You and I, we've got a great life. We've got that down pretty good. See ya." I realized I had not communicated to him what an abundant life would look in any meaningful way. Frankly, it's a hard concept to get across because so often we are seeking the *good* life. Jesus had a hard time getting across what an abundant life would look like, as well. In the 10th chapter of John, it says the first people who heard Jesus use the illustration about the Good Shepherd and the thief didn't understand.

⁷ So Jesus said again, "I assure you: I am the door

or the gate

of the sheep. ⁸ All who came before Me are thieves and robbers, but the sheep didn't listen to them. ⁹ I am the door. If anyone enters by Me, he will be saved and will come in and go out and find pasture. ¹⁰ A thief comes only to steal and to kill and to destroy [John 10:7-10].

This morning we are giving out one-third of 170 Bibles to these little kids. They showed us that they were learning to pray the way Jesus taught us all to pray, right out of the Bible. They know the Lord's Prayer and part of that prayer is

¹³ And lead us not into temptation, but deliver us from evil [Matthew 6:13].

"Help us watch out for the thief" is what they were saying because the thief has the intent to separate us from the Shepherd and all the sheep, to steal our souls, to kill our hearts and destroy our names. The kids will learn all about that. Jesus ended His teaching, saying,

¹⁰ I have come so that they may have life and have it in abundance. ¹¹ "I am the Good Shepherd [John 10:10-11].

Life in all of its abundance. When you think about abundance, what comes to your mind? I took a couple days to go up north recently and we drove through the harvest, through fields that were just so unbelievable, fields that will literally feed the world. It looked incredible. That's what I think about when I think about abundance. Or, I think about a feast when there is so much to eat, like at Thanksgiving, when you just waddle along for days afterwards. What is abundance like? I asked my brother what abundance is like and he goes, "Overflowing beer mugs, man." We all have different ideas of what abundance is, but that's what I should have answered my friend Steve. I should have said, "Steve, what's missing in your life that stops it from overflowing, from feeling abundant?" Not okay life. Not successful life. Not a happy life or a healthy life, but a life that's really overflowing.

What would abundance look like for you? Come and check it out. If you are with a group of people who believe that there is a God and that God had an idea of life that overflowed for them, what might that look like? An overflowing life would probably start right at the beginning with love. Abundant means that we learn to love God and learn to love others. If I had an abundant life, it would not mean that I feel that way all the time, but that over time, I am going down that road. I sense God's presence and I'm learning to love others better in spite of the crashes and detours and getting lost, the breakdowns. More and more in my life, I would experience love for God that I could share with other people. That's abundant life. In contrast with a society of acquisition, I think the abundant life would also be marked with a secret, a secret about how to be content. The apostle Paul says,

12 I know what it is to be in need, and I know what it is to have plenty. I have learned the secret of being content in any and every situation [Philippians 4:12].

That's abundance in life. I think it would mean I would learn that my life should be peaceful and quiet as opposed to frenetic. "I've always got to go to the next thing." Paul says to Timothy, "It is a peaceful quiet life of Godliness and wholeness, becoming whole." I think if I were to live an abundant life, it would not be stopped by bad times. Everybody has bad times, don't they? Everybody does, but Jesus said, "Blessed are the poor." Somehow you can be blessed when you mourn. "Blessed are the meek." Blessed are you in the good and bad of life. That's abundance. A life that is overflowing would be fruitful, right? The Bible talks about our lives bearing fruit and that fruit is patience, gentleness, kindness, self-control, and the one that I want most—people who are living abundant life have unquenchable joy. Some of you struggle with this, but you have been given joy. Don't lose it! The glass is not half-empty on its way to being broken. The glass is a gift from God this day.

I think if I were to talk about what would mark somebody who is living an abundant life, they would have bad days just like I do, but they would have unquenchable hope. They would be hopeful people, hope-filled people. What should I have said to Steve? "What's missing in your life? What stops it from overflowing?" How about you? Are you content? Would you be described as joyful? More and more is there a sense of hope in your life? When people look at you, would they see somebody who is falling in love with God and with other people? Not becoming religious, but falling in love? What's missing in your life? I think there is a gap between normal life and abundant life. Jesus says, "I have come because people are not living the abundant life. I have come that they might have life like this." There is a gap between the way we are supposed to experience life and normal life, because normal life is not normal. Normal life is broken by the thief, who is right now trying to steal your joy and destroy your hope and kill your love. There is a gap in there. If you go to England, you will see it said over and over

and over, "Mind the gap." There's a tiny little gap between the underground train door and the station platform. "Mind the gap. Don't fall in." I think there's a gap in our lives between the life I want to have, the life I know I'm destined for, and the knot in my stomach. Sometimes that's just normal but sometimes, there's a gap between what life could be, what life should be, and what life isn't that's dramatic.

The very first time I was ever on a mission trip with Christ Presbyterian was not to Africa or the Far East. It was to Europe. With the fall of the Iron Curtain, the medical system in Eastern Europe collapsed and part of what collapsed were the orphanages. Orphanages in Romania were filled with children who were no longer able to be supported. There was nobody to take care of them. These kids would be in rooms that were filled with cribs. They would be given something to chew on and a bottle once a day and occasionally, though not even daily, their diaper would be changed. This is what they looked like. [Slide shown.] They stood at the edge of their cribs and they rocked, hour after hour after hour. You might remember on TV talk about the Iron Crib. The crib became a little cage for these kids. World Vision was trying not to just feed children who were starved, but to love children who were dying. They had a medical condition called FTT, Failure to Thrive. Sometimes it is genetic or metabolic when kids just don't grow or thrive. Sometimes it's because of what the parents did when the children were *in utero*. The babies get way behind and they fail to grow and develop, but most often, failure to thrive is children who are not held, loved, and talked to. They have the opposite of abundant life. They fail to thrive.

May I tell you, I think that failure to thrive is all around us. I think what God intended was for our lives to flourish, to bubble up, like a flower stubbornly pushing through a crack in the sidewalk. It is why we pause in wonder at a human being's first step or first word and why we ought to wonder at every step and every word. Thriving is what God saw when He made life and saw that it was good. "Thrive" was the first command. "Be fruitful." Like a little kid who is learning to toddle. You look at that and you go, "Oh, it's a miracle!" It *is* miracle! Like a child who learns his first words or the kid in eighth grade who learns a whole new thing and you go, "Yes!" They are thriving. Thriving is what God intended when He made life and saw that it was good. "Be fruitful," He said. "Multiply."

Too many of us, too many of you, are failing to thrive. You are not thriving. You are just getting up, going through your day, and going to bed at night. In life on those terms, there is little abundance that is not material in your life. Are you thriving or are you just going through the motions most days? When I talked about the signs of abundance, I listed some that came to my mind out of the Scriptures. I left one off deliberately because I think it's the trigger, the one that starts all the others toward abundance of life.

There are 170 of these little Bibles. The reason I know there are 170 is because each year I have the privilege of writing a little note and then signing my name in each one. I write a little note so the kids will know that I prayed for them, and on every Bible we hand out, I underline in Joshua 1. Most often the note I write is on Joshua 1. See if you can figure out what I think the last sign of the abundant life is.

5 No one will be able to stand against you all the days of your life. As I was with Moses, so I will be with you; I will never leave you nor forsake you. **6** Be strong and courageous, because you will lead these people to inherit the land I swore to their ancestors to give them. **7** Be strong and very courageous. Be careful to obey all the law my servant Moses

gave you; do not turn from it to the right or to the left, that you may be successful wherever you go. **8** Keep this Book of the Law always on your lips; meditate on it day and night, so that you may be careful to do everything written in it. Then you will be prosperous and successful. **9** Have I not commanded you? Be strong and courageous. Do not be afraid; do not be discouraged, for the LORD your God will be with you wherever you go."

What is the theme that we want the kids to know? Not to be afraid. Not to be scared. It is repeated four different times because we are fraidy cats! The first prerequisite for the abundant life is to become fearless, not fearless like we usually think about some superhero who seems to have no fear. That's not what I think fearless means in the Bible. I think fearless in the Bible means to fear less than I used to fear because I'm not trapped by my fears.

Sometimes you can see a sign in somebody who has chosen not to be trapped by their fears in an odd place. I was helped this year by a theologian of great note. Most of you have heard of this theologian. He gives lectures all the time. He's on TV. His name is Stephen Colbert. He's Jewish. I don't want to say that I was reading *Parade Magazine*, but *Parade Magazine* interviewed Stephen Colbert and he talked about his conversion back to Christianity. His faith deeply affects his life. He spoke about his conversion back to Christianity as a young adult and said he was moved by Jesus' admonition in Matthew 6:25, "Do not worry." That passage not only became the touchstone of his return to faith; it is also how he explains his calling, his vocation, his comedy. "That's being fearless," Colbert said. "Not living in fear is a great gift because certainly these days we live that way so much. And do you know what I like about comedy? You can't laugh and be afraid at the same time—of anything. If you're laughing, I defy you to be afraid."

There is a sense that it is a presence of joy, a presence of love, that pushes out fear. I love that, but how do you do that in a normal life, in a Tuesday-afternoon life? Henri Nouwen said when we start to feel the bumbles, when we spend more time living in the house of fear than we do living in the house of love, we need to consciously leave the house of fear. What are you afraid of? We need to move back into the house of love. That is what Jesus is talking about here. "I am the door," He says. "I am the gate where the sheep live. When you come in to Me to be with the other sheep, you're moving into the house of love because love casts out fear. Our relationships, our dreams, our arguments, our decisions are all marred by fear and Jesus invites us to come to Him. He will lead us to the house of love. Sometimes that happens dramatically, but most of the time, it's just one step at a time.

There's a fetish in my circles for an author named Frederick Buechner. He's actually a Presbyterian minister, but he felt like his calling was to become a writer. He has been Pulitzer-nominated twice. He's a terrific author. He has written dozens of books and is famous and successful, but about 20 years ago, that success didn't mean anything. He was being asked to speak at Harvard and Princeton and Yale, but he had a hard time accepting because his child was sick. His daughter, his little girl, was dying of anorexia. She wouldn't eat. She was filled with the enemy. Buechner and his wife said, "Oh, honey, honey, you've got to eat." He said, "I tried to push food into her mouth and every time I did, she would run away. I couldn't fix her and I kept asking, 'God, what are You doing here?'"

Buechner says, "At the very end we put her into an institution that would force feed her so she wouldn't die so fast, but I lost my little girl. As I was driving away from the institution out into the

rain, I got to a place where I couldn't even see to drive so I pulled off to the side of the road. Tears were coming down my face and outside the rain was coming down and I said, "God, God, where are You, God?" Then Buechner said, "In front of me a car pulled up to the stop sign and stopped. The driver looked and drove off and everything changed for me. I looked at the license plate of the car, it was a Vermont license plate, and through my tears, I could see the word TRUST. In my intellectual brain, I knew that this guy was probably a banker at First Bank and Trust, but to me, it was a word from God. It was a word from the Shepherd saying, "Trust Me." He said, "I didn't have anything solved and I didn't have any more wisdom, but I felt like I was not alone. I felt like I could go on." That's the beginning of thriving. That's moving from the house of fear into the house of love. He said, "When I share that story with other people, they say, 'Oh, me, too'" because abundance of life is a gift that we receive to share with others.

It was perfect to have the first and second graders receive their Bibles on this day because this is All Saints' Day. On the first day after Halloween when the devils are supposed to scare us, we are reminded of the saints of all the ages when we come to the table. When we eat at the table, they say, "We did it. It was a journey that took us all of our lives, but we moved a little bit, even just a little bit, from the house of fear into the house of love and God started to feed us hope and grace." When we come here, we will see some of their faces up on the screen and we'll eat with them the meal of the Shepherd. If you listen very carefully, you will hear them say, "Follow us! Come on! Come! Follow the Shepherd!" Those first and second graders are saints-in-training, just like you.

Lord Jesus, I pray that those first and second graders will read their Bibles and believe that You are the Good Shepherd. I pray that they will have abundance of life, not be rich or famous or happier or healthier, but have an abundance of life. I pray that they will take it and enjoy and hope and love You so much that they are not afraid. Bless them. Bless us. In Your good Name. Amen.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.