

Church of the Servant, Wilmington, NC

The Rev. Catherine Powell

Scripture: John 10 "I have come that they might have life, and have it abundantly."

I recently watched a clip from a Frontline show from 2009. It was about how ad campaigns are moving from focusing on the product to focusing on the promise of meaning—"emotional branding."

Examples:

- First, a Chinet ad. (Chinet is a brand of paper plates.) As the commercial begins, a warm voice says, "What are you saying with your Chinet plates?" We see candles being lighted, people greeting each other with hugs; the focus is soft. Then, people with loving expressions hold up paper plates on which they've written: "Friends," "tradition," "You're special."
- Next, we see a Nike ad. It's grainy image of a thin, good-looking woman straining to lift weights. Words flash on the screen. "Pain," "goals." The word "Impossible" becomes "possible" as the woman victoriously lifts the weights high. She has overcome all!

A commentator on the clip then talked about listening to a focus group of Nike owners and being struck by the "evangelical" language they were using. He noted his interest in finding out why they were so hooked; after all, he said, at the end of the day "this is just *footwear*." Not the Holy Grail.

The expert being interviewed noted that the language in many focus groups of people who love a certain product is the same as one might hear in a religious faith or a cult. After analysis he came up with the underlying key to these products success: the human desire for meaning and belonging. The point is not only that advertisers are onto us; it is also how much we human beings hunger for identity and meaning. Products, the show concluded, have come to "fill the empty places" in our lives—in our souls.

Today's gospel includes references to abundant life, life to the full. *Abundant*—The Greek word used means *superabundant*, overflowing, beyond expectations. This abundant life is what the ads were talking about-- life with meaning, purpose, and fulfillment. These are the things that fill up our souls.

The Gospel tells us that faith in the Good Shepherd gives us this life, but, Christianity does not look like abundant life to outsiders. They see it as dull, austere, or even punitive. Rather than giving an impression of generosity and abundance, Christian groups are often seen as stingy, gripping tightly God's generous love, only willing to dole it out in small doses to those deemed worthy.

We could brainstorm a long list of ways Christian groups shouldn't act, ways that squelch abundant life. In fact, we could come up with a long list of lots of things that promise abundant life but don't deliver. And I'm not only talking about paper plates. As we go through life, we experience more and more of these approaches that don't work: putting our hopes in job titles, salaries, achievements, celebrity, products, chemicals, drugs, addictions; expecting children, partners, spouses to fill up our souls. We get pretty good at identifying what does NOT give abundant life. That's a valuable starting place but perhaps we can go farther.

What DOES give abundant life? We can look at Jesus and his message summed up in the Good Shepherd image. We can see the direction it points us. The Good Shepherd passages offers many insights but I'll just mention the usual preacher's three.

-- First of all, the passage encourages us to move beyond our fears. The Good Shepherd goes in front where he will meet any danger; he doesn't run away the way a hired hand might; he lays down his own life. We know that in life there are real dangers we meet, but this image offers us—and challenges us to accept—fearless living. By trusting that God will, in the end, overcome all dangers and evil, we can live with a feeling of safety. This gives us the ability to live in the moment, to savor its gifts. Perhaps we can sum this up this point with the word *courage*.

-- Secondly, the Good Shepherd offers his voice as a guide to the sheep. To be a sheep in this fold is to accept a link with something bigger than ourselves, with that great One we call God. It requires trusting that there is more than our limited point of view and instincts can show us. This is a gift and a challenge. It reminds us that there is a bigger perspective—and a bigger hope—than our own. Perhaps we can sum this one up as *humility*.

-- Thirdly, the Good Shepherd knows his own and they know him; he knows their names. Knowing their names is significant. He knows their true selves—in all their glory and all their weakness. To accept the Good Shepherd is to know yourself vulnerable—but that is what is needed for true intimacy. God loves us as we truly are and we can respond in love. We can call this one relationship or *vulnerability*.

The job of nurturing these traits and experiences in ourselves is a slow one. It doesn't yield results as quickly as buying a new pair of running shoes. But it doesn't take long, even with new shoes in hand and on feet, to find out that a pair of shoes does not make us strong, transcendent over aches, pains, and struggle. And in fact Naomi Klein, one of those interviewed in the Frontline segment, noted that our disappointment works out just fine for the ad agencies. When we eventually realize that the product we bought has not eased our existential angst or filled us with love and satisfaction—well, we go shopping again. But we can choose to live another way.

In a collection of quotes I have long saved I have one by Martin Marty, religious scholar and columnist. It reminds us that spiritual fulfillment, and life itself, are processes, journeys. He says, "Be whole—very gradually, and despite many setbacks, and under the cross. Wouldn't it be good to hear that word now and then, rather than the word of mere despair or instant cure for whatever ails you, church, and world." (Martin Marty, *Context*, December 1977)

The Gospel is good news because it points a true way, a real way, to fulfillment and even joy. It is not a snap deliverance from difficulties. It is a way, not a product. But the way itself—though not giving immediate perfection—does include moments of deep fulfillment and grace. So, leaving the fantasy of instant and everlasting cures behind, let us put on some well-worn traveling shoes, following our Good Shepherd in the way of courage, humility, trust, and vulnerability—a way that leads to abundant life.

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Some of the ideas in this sermon came from:

[http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear\\_wp.aspx?article\\_id=475](http://www.workingpreacher.org/dear_wp.aspx?article_id=475) which referred to the 2009 Frontline program clip on youtube:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rGjunT4RzME&feature=BFa&list=PLOCE3DEABD8E4D185&index=3>

Naomi Klein, mentioned in this sermon, is the author of *No Logo*.