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The Gospel of John
XXXI. That They May Have Life
John 10:1-21

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In Walker Percy's novel, The Second Coming, we meet the character of Will Barrett. Will is a talented, agreeable, successful man who absolutely despises the life he is living. On the outside, he is living the Dream: a successful career as a lawyer on Wall Street, early retirement to a beautiful southern mountain retreat, a six-handicap golf game, and more money than he will ever spend. But one day, in the midst of all that plenty and success, reality breaks in on him – or, rather, for the first time in a long while his soul begins speaking to him. And Will begins to see the life he has been living far more clearly than ever before. He begins wrestling with demons long-buried, now resurrected from his past – and wrestling with the choices he has made along the way. And he comes to realize that everything he has gained materially has come at a significant cost personally, relationally, spiritually. Percy writes:

Not once in his entire life had he allowed himself to come to rest in the quiet center of himself but had forever cast himself forward from some dark past he could not remember to a future which did not exist. Not once had he been present for his life. So his life had passed like a dream.¹

And all of this leaves Will contemplating a singularly devastating question. “*Is it possible,*” he wonders, “*for people to miss their lives in the same way one misses a plane?*”

To be human, to be alive, is to be searching for our lives – trying to find that something, or that combination of somethings which will at last enable us to feel what we so long to feel. To feel truly at home, to feel lasting contentment, to feel that our lives are meaningful and fulfilling – to feel happy! Trying to find that place in life, that state of mind in life, which is just the right place, the right state of mind – life the way we know it is supposed to be for us, life the way we long for it to be for us. We may not be aware of our searching, that longing in our souls, at every moment, or even every so often – daily life has a way of running us from one thing to the next such that such deep thoughts never have a chance to come to the forefront. But that doesn't mean that the longing is not there. And that does not mean that beneath the press of our daily lives we are not continually searching for that life we know we want, that life we know we need.

But how do we find it? How do we come to possess it? I mean, to begin with, do we even have a clue as to what such a life would actually look like, what the details of it would contain and what it would exclude? Maybe that is why we are so easily drawn into the schemes and false

dreams this world keeps offering up to us as life the way we should want it to be. Even though none of what the world offers ever delivers what it promises. All the usual suspects, in one combination or another – money, status, sex, power, toys, trips, a self-focused mind in a tanned fit body. Or, these days, add in things even more trivial than that – whatever the social media influencers are telling us we must have, must do, must eat, must wear, must try, must become this week. No wonder that verse from Isaiah 55 is so haunting to us – so haunting because we know it is so true of us: “*Why do you spend your money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?*”² We don’t even know what we are looking for, much less where to find it:

*The Paradox of Our Time in History is that
we spend more, but have less;
we buy more, but enjoy it less.
We have bigger houses and smaller families;
more conveniences, but less time,
more medicine, but less wellness.
We read too little, watch TV too much, and pray too seldom.
We have multiplied our possessions, but reduced our values.
These are the times of tall men, but short character;
steep profits, and shallow relationships . . .
We’ve learned how to make a living, but not a life;
we’ve added years to life, [but] not life to years . . .*³

So where do we find this life which we are searching for, longing for? Where do we look for it – even if we don’t even know what it might look like – this life which instinctively we know we are meant to be living? Can anyone tell us where it is, what it is, and how we may obtain it?

“*I have come,*” says Jesus, “*that they may have life and have it abundantly.*” “*I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.*” Could it be that the life we are longing for, the life we are searching for, the life we instinctively know we are meant to possess – that this life is also longing for us, and has already come searching for us? Already has entered into the world so that we might indeed possess the life He created us for?

*Our hungers are so deep. We are dying of thirst. We are bundles of seemingly insatiable need, rushing here and there in a vain attempt to assuage our emptiness. Our culture is a vast supermarket of desire. Can it be that our bread, our wine, our fulfillment stands before us in the presence of this crucified, resurrected Jew?*⁴

“*I came that they might have life and have it abundantly.*” Jesus. The life we are searching for, longing for, instinctively know is meant to be ours – Jesus is the key to this life. Jesus is the life we are longing for. “*I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.*”

For, first of all, He says to us that He is the door through which we enter into that life: “*I am the door. If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and go in and out and find pasture.*” What

does the Psalmist say? *“He makes me lie down in green pastures. He leads me beside still waters. He restores my soul.”*⁵ Jesus is the door through which we enter into the life we are seeking, the life we are longing for, the life we instinctively know we are meant to be living. The only way we get that life, the only way we enter into that life, is through Him. He is the door to everything we are searching for. *“If anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.”* Find life, and that abundantly.

One of my favorite finding life/finding salvation stories comes from the writer Anne Lamotte. She tells of a period in her life in which she was desperately empty, desperately starving. She tried to feed herself through drug and alcohol addictions, which only led her to the deeper starvation of suicide attempts and clinical depression. Then one day she was stumbling down the street past a small, kind of ramshackle looking Presbyterian church in Marin City, California. Pouring out of the open door of this church was music, wonderful gospel music – and she was transfixed by the sound. She began to hear words that she remembered from her childhood, before the dark days. It touched something deep within her soul, and she started coming back to stand outside that church Sunday after Sunday, just to listen and to remember. After many weeks, she got up the courage to move to the doorway of the church so she could hear a little better. She didn’t go in, but inside she could see a choir of five black women and one white man singing with joy written upon their faces. The congregation of thirty or so seemed to radiate kindness and warmth.

And then, finally, one day her hunger led her through that door, through that door and into the sanctuary, where she met Jesus and was warmly greeted and cared for by His saints in that congregation. And slowly, week by week, she was brought back to life by the real food of the gospel of Jesus Christ. She writes:

*Something inside me that was stiff and rotting would feel soft and tender. Somehow the singing wore down all the boundaries and distinctions that kept me so isolated. Sitting there . . . sometimes so shaky and sick that I felt I might tip over, I felt bigger than myself, like I was being taken care of, tricked into coming back to life.*⁶

Jesus is the door. *“I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” “And I am the door to that life – if anyone enters by me, he will be saved and will go in and out and find pasture.”* Will find what we are searching for, longing for – the life we know is meant to be ours.

But Jesus is not just the door which opens to that life. Jesus is also the Good Shepherd who comes after us and finds us wherever we are wandering lost from Him and lost from the abundant life He wants to us to possess. He is the Good Shepherd who seeks us out, finds us, and then leads us back to the door of the sheepfold, carries us in toward the life we are meant to be living.

What man of you, having a hundred sheep, if he has lost one of them, does not leave the ninety-nine in the open country, and go after the one that is lost, until he finds it? And when he has found it, he lays it on his shoulders, rejoicing. And when he comes home,

he calls together his friends and his neighbors, saying to them, "Rejoice with me, for I have found my sheep that is lost." ⁷

"I am the good shepherd," says Jesus. "The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep . . . I am the good shepherd. I know my own and my own know me." "The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out. When he has brought out all his own, he goes before them, and the sheep follow him, for they know his voice." They follow Him further and further, deeper and deeper, into that abundant life He gives to them.

Frederica Mathewes-Green, a Christian writer and a commentator on the NPR program, "All Things Considered," tells of the day when Jesus called her by her name – and she recognized His voice. And He began leading her, and she began following Him, into that life abundant:

Though raised in a minimally Christian home, I had rejected the faith by my early teens. I remained spiritually curious, however, and spent the following years browsing the world's spiritual food court, gathering tasty delights. The core of my home-made belief system was "the life force;" the raw energy of life, I'd concluded, was the essence of God, and the various world religions were poetic attempts to express that truth. I selected among those scraps of poetry as they pleased me.

My senior year in college I gained a startling insight: I realized that my selections were inevitably conditioned by my own tastes, prejudices, and blind spots. I was patching together a Frankenstein God in my own image, and it would never be taller than five foot one. If I wanted to grow beyond my own meager wisdom, I would have to submit to a faith bigger than I was and accept its instruction. ⁸

So, for a while after that insight, Mathewes-Green became a practicing Hindu. But a few years later, while she was on her honeymoon, she found herself standing in front of a statue of Jesus in a church in Dublin. She was admiring its aesthetic proportions and artistic skill, when suddenly something happened to her. She writes:

I can't really explain what happened next. I was standing there looking at the statue, and then I discovered I was on my knees. I could hear an interior voice speaking to me . . . The voice was both intimate and authoritative, and it filled me.

It said, "I am your life. You think that your life is your name, your personality, your history. But that is not your life. I am your life . . ." ⁹

Jesus. And Mathewes-Green got up off the floor, and began to follow Jesus. To follow Jesus as He leads her into a different, into a better, into a new and abundant life. Just as He promises. Just as He came into this world to do for us, each one.

“I am the good shepherd.” “The sheep hear his voice, and he calls his own sheep by name and leads them out . . . for they know his voice.” Jesus is the Door through which we enter into that life we are searching for, longing for, know in our heart of hearts we are meant to possess. And Jesus is the Good Shepherd who leads us out of our lost lives, our less-than lives, and into that life abundant. All we have to do is just follow Him. Listen to His voice as He calls us by name – and follow Him.

*The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want.
He makes me lie down in green pastures.
He leads me beside still waters.
He restores my soul.
He leads me in paths of righteousness
for his name’s sake.
Even though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil,
for you are with me;
your rod and your staff, they comfort me.
You prepare a table before me
in the presence of my enemies;
you anoint my head with oil;
my cup overflows.
Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me
all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord
forever.¹⁰*

Jesus is calling to us this morning: *“I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”* Jesus is how we find that life. Jesus is how we enter into that life and Jesus is how we learn how to live that life. Jesus is how that life just keeps growing in us more and more abundantly day after day. Because – Jesus **is** our life.

¹ Walker Percy, The Second Coming (New York: Washington Square Press, 1980), p. 144.

² Isaiah 55:2.

³ Quoted in David G. Myers, “Seeking More In an Age of Plenty,” Christianity Today, April 24, 2000, p. 95.

⁴ William H. Willimon in David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, eds., Feasting on the Word, Year B, Volume 3 (Louisville: Westminster/John Knox Press, 2009), p. 337.

⁵ Psalm 23:2-3.

⁶ Anne Lamotte, Traveling Mercies (New York: Pantheon Books, 1999), pp. 46-48.

⁷ Luke 15:4-6.

⁸ Frederica Mathewes-Green, At the Corner of East and Now (New York: Jeremy P. Tarcher/Putnam, 1999), pp. 2-3.

⁹ Mathewes-Green, p. 4.

¹⁰ Psalm 23.