

A fellow who had been reared in the city bought a farm and several milk cows. In the feed store one day he complained his best cow had gone dry. "Aren't you feeding her right?" asked the store owner. "I'm feeding her what you've been selling me," said the man. "Are you milking her everyday?" "Just about. If I need six or eight ounces of milk for breakfast, I go out and get it. If I don't need any, I don't get it--I just let her save it up." The feed store owner had to explain it doesn't work that way. With cow's milk you take **all** that's there, or you eventually have nothing.

Jesus has just told a couple of stories of sheep and shepherds and of gates and thieves and bandits. Jesus is calling his listeners to recognize that he is providing a way to a new kind of life. Jesus is telling them that he has come that they might have life and have it abundantly. Like milk from a cow, we need to live fully the life that God has blessed us with, or we may end up with nothing.

What does it mean to live abundantly and what keeps us from abundant life?

I love those days—although I haven't seen it in a while—that the weather channel says will bring "abundant sunshine." Clearly a day with abundant sunshine is going to be a good day. A day with abundant sunshine means we'll have all the sun we need but not so much that we need to hunker down inside with the air conditioning on.

There's a time in my life where I clearly remember the sense that I had abundant life. I remember thinking, "life is good." (It would be interesting to know if it was one of those days with abundant sunshine.)

If one measured my life at that time by wealth, or family relationships, or social connections, or material gain, some might not think I had abundant life. I was living in a two-bedroom apartment with mostly second-hand furniture. I had an old Honda Civic with a dent in the side. I was single and not seeing anyone. I was just getting started in my business, but didn't have a lot of customers or jobs or money in the bank. I didn't have a lot by some measures, but at the time, I remember feeling I had all I needed. As I look back at that time in my life, I remember a sense of balance, and of wholeness and of connectedness.

How many of you know what it is to have abundant life and how many feel like that's where you are now?

Today we are going to have a healing time after the sermon hymn. There will be time to meditate, to come and light a candle and lift up prayers and a time to come forward for anointing with oil and laying on of hands as we pray for the healing power of the Spirit. You can receive this prayer for yourself, or share the name of someone or something else. You can participate in any of these as you feel called.

As we ask for healing, we may be seeking a physical cure from a tangible sickness. We may hope that long-present pains go away, that a cancer once beaten back not be found on our next CAT scan, that we be blessed with hope of remission from a chronic disease. We may seek that kind of healing and it is well that we should ask for that—for ourselves or for someone we care about.

We may seek emotional and spiritual support to deal with physical challenges that we face or that someone close to us struggles with. We may ask God for strength, for

hope or for assurance. We may seek that kind of healing and it is well we should ask for that. God calls us to come with all of our concerns and God promises to hear us.

But the healing that God promises us is more than just physical kinds of healing or help with responses to those physical struggles. The idea of healing is tied to God's promise of salvation. The Greek word for salvation can have the meaning of health and well being—of having one's inner being preserved. The promise of salvation is not just some future promise for eternal life after this life. The promise of salvation is a promise that has meaning for us in our lives today. To experience God's salvation means that we experience healing. It means that which is broken within and around us is remade. It means that we are transformed—changed from the person we were before and called into a new way of being. Like the symbol for this church, we change from the fuzzy brown and black caterpillar that inches along in life into the brilliantly colored butterfly—blessed with wings to fly.

The healing that is encompassed in the promise of salvation is a healing that brings transformation for our whole person, not just for a broken part. Salvation brings us a sense of balance, of wholeness and of connectedness. Salvation can mean healing of our bodies but it can also mean healing of our minds, hearts and spirits. As we experience the fullness of God's promise of salvation we are made whole in all of our parts. We are reconnected to God's original promise for us, we are brought back around to being the person God intends us to be.

And finally, the healing that is contained in God's promise of salvation is a healing that brings us back into relationship with the world. As people who have received God's healing touch we are sent to bring that healing to the world—to be stewards of

God's saving promise to all of God's people. As one's who have been brought back to a place of wholeness, we are strengthened to reconnect with those broken around us.

God's promise of salvation can bring physical healing, but the promise is much, much more than that. God's promise of salvation is a promise of abundant life, a life lived here and now. A life lived fully and richly. A life that participates in God's healing of the world.

There is so much, however, that pulls us away from the abundant life that Jesus came to bring us. So much that brings a sense of scarcity rather than abundance. So much that can leave us feeling like we don't have enough, that there isn't enough. So much that can leave us feeling that another person's happiness or blessings somehow means we have been shorted. It can seem that we live in some kind of zero-sum game where we have to get all we can because there isn't going to be enough to go around for all of us. In our vigilance to be sure our needs are met we can lose sight of the needs of others. There is so much that keeps us from knowing life as abundant—for us and for all of God's people.

Clearly accumulated wealth doesn't bring with it a requisite sense of abundance. We may have more than enough in the bank, but it doesn't feel that way to us. All too often accumulating money and stuff seems only to lead us to believe that we need still more money and stuff. It turns our focus to the money and the stuff and away from God, the source of all our blessings.

Often it seems that an abundant life is one where we stay busy all the time, doing all we can—living every minute. Our culture tells us that busy people are better people. We multi-task, thinking that by doing two or three things at a time we are accomplishing

two or three times as much, when in reality we are just doing two or three things poorly and meanwhile shorting some other aspect of our life—like our attention to those around us, or our attention to ourselves even. And then we find that the idea that our life is abundant is just a theory and in fact, we are exhausted.

And then, I think finally, we are reluctant to trust that God will truly provide us with an abundant life. I think that we imagine that if we let go, for even just a minute, everything will come crashing to a halt, toppling to the ground—breaking into dozens of pieces. I think that we imagine that if we let go, we will just be lost, unable to find our way again.

There is so much in our busy, complicated and challenging lives that keeps us from having the abundant life that Jesus came to provide—that keeps us from living into the healing promise of salvation.

I'm going to suggest just three things that might help us to begin to live abundantly.

First, make time for prayer. Make time to be in conversation with God—to be connected to God—and to be changed by God. Author Kathleen Norris says, “Prayer is not asking for what you think you want, but asking to be changed in ways you can't imagine.” God's healing power can make us new in ways we could have never imagined. Listen for where God is sending you and be prepared to be surprised. Consider talking with a spiritual director to help you in your discernment. Read scripture devotionally—searching out the ways God is speaking to you through the Bible.

Second, seek out ways to give. Giving our time and our resources reconnects us with God's work for the world and puts those blessings in our lives into proper

perspective. All we have is God's and we're called to use it to advance God's saving work. The ways we give are connected to where God is sending us into the world. What's God's call for you and how can you answer it?

And finally, find ways to trust. Consider keeping a journal and write in it the things that you are lifting up to God's care. "Today I am not going to worry about my problem with my boss—I am going to put that in God's hands. Tomorrow I can take it back if I need to, but for today, I am lifting it up into God's care." And then look back, as time goes on, and see how God has been at work in your life and the lives of others..

In the ordination service, when the stole is placed over the ordinand's shoulders, the presiding minister quotes Matthew, saying, "Come to me, all who labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest. Take my yoke upon you, and learn from me; for I am gentle and lowly in heart, and you will find rest for your souls. For my yoke is easy, and my burden is light."

That's God's promise to all of us and in that promise is the way to abundant life. We can trust the promise.