

Sermon July 28, 2024
[John 6:1-21]

What's Your Story?
Rev. Dan Peterson

Grace to you and peace from God, the Creator, and from Jesus, who is the Christ.
Amen.

I'm going to preach this morning's sermon as if Pat Sobek was sitting right here. So, this is dedicated to her and her memory, now among us.

The sermon, as I mentioned at the outset, is called, "What's Your Story?"

Here's my question: What are the negative stories you tell yourselves about yourselves, and how do they prevent you from living an abundant life?

Now, the phrase "abundant life" might sound like self-help, something you'd find on the shelf of a Barnes and Noble bookstore, but it actually comes from Jesus, in the same Gospel from which we read, chapter 10, verse 10, where he says, "I came that they may have life and have it abundantly."

One of my favorite phrases that really captures this teaching comes from a theologian from the second century whose name was Irenaeus. He said, "The glory of God is a human being fully alive."

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The question that I want to ask each of you is: What is preventing you from being "fully alive"?

David Lohse is the former president of Luther Seminary. He says, "We are narrative beings," by which he means we make sense of our lives through *story*, or rather, the stories we tell ourselves.

We don't simply make these up in a cultural vacuum. They belong to the culture in which we live, the air in which we breathe. So, what are these stories? Lohse explains:

"You are what you own." The consumerist narrative.

"Image is everything." The vanity narrative.

"You deserve more." The entitlement narrative.

"There is not enough." The scarcity narrative – if *they* get it, *I* won't. That's one we hear a lot, isn't it? If they get it – insert here "immigrants," for example – I won't. Another version of the scarcity narrative.

"You should be afraid." The alarmist narrative.

"I'm too old." The ageist narrative.

"I'm not popular enough." The high school narrative!

These stories shape our lives. They are the stories by which we live, often without us ever really knowing it. Most of them, you might gather, involve consumption. They inform the way we shop, the way we vote, the way we dress, the way we treat others,

the way we conduct our business, the way we manage our free time, the way we understand the meaning and purpose of our lives, the way we think of ourselves.

So, try this question: Can you identify a story that has shaped you? What is the story you tell yourself that prevents you from living an abundant life, the life to which Jesus calls you?

You may use an example I gave, or state your own, if it helps. For me, there are two stories that really define my life at present.

Number one: "I'm a writer, not a preacher," or "I'm a teacher, not a pastor." These are stories either that I conjure up, or that have been projected onto me, and they're stories often by which I live. When I call myself "Rabbi Daniel," for example, there's a story there. The story is that you are a teacher.

When I preach, I can't tell you, and perhaps our fellow pastor here would agree, how terrifying it is, even though I know most of you very well, but how terrifying it is to stand up in front of you and speak. And so, I overcompensate by relying too much on the perfectly-worded outline I composed over the last couple of days. [Does that match your experience? Amen. Okay, I got an Amen. All right, all right.]

So, I really want to push back against that narrative, and today's sermon is an attempt to do so, because I believe that narrative is not only preventing me from living a more abundant life, it sometimes undercuts my ability to be the best pastor I can be for you.

The second narrative that defines my life, and perhaps maybe a little, the life of my Cantor: "My work is my worth." My work is my worth. I bring up the Cantor because he and I are both very productive people. We get a lot done, don't we? During the week, we have all kinds of things to do, and the point is to get them done.

But that may be more my personality style, which I learned about a week or two ago at an Insight Workshop that our Jean Oplinger led for the staff. Maybe I think too much in terms of goals, and prevent myself from living in the present.

Maybe my narrative is something like the one Alan Watts describes. Now, who was Alan Watts? How many of you have heard of him before? A few of you, all right. He was an Episcopal priest who became a Buddhist philosopher in the mid 20th century. He identified himself as a spiritual entertainer, or a philosophical entertainer. You will see here why. "In music," he says, "one doesn't make the *end* of the composition the *point* of the composition." If that were so, the best conductors would be those who play fastest, and there would be composers who wrote only finales! Can you imagine that, Kyle, only finales? I was going to ask him to do a cymbal hit. We don't have cymbals, and I don't think he would have cooperated anyway... People would go to concerts just to hear one crashing chord, and that's the end!

But we don't see that; it's something brought by our education, instead, into our everyday conduct:

We've got a system of schooling that gives a completely different impression. It's all graded, and what we do is we put the child into the corridor of this grade system with a kind of "come on here, kitty, kitty, kitty! And now you go to kindergarten," you know? And that's a great thing, because when you finish that, you get into the first grade, and then, come on, first grade leads to second grade, and so on. And then you get out of grade school, and you enter high school, and the thing is revving up; it's coming. Then you go to college, and by Jove, then you get into graduate school, and when you're through with graduate school, then you go out into the world. And then you get into some racket, where you're selling insurance – and they've got that quota to make, and you're going to make that. And then all the time it's coming. The thing is coming. It's coming, that great thing, that success you're working for.

Then you wake up one day, about 40 years old, and you say, "my God, I've arrived, I'm here." And you don't feel very different than you've always felt. And there's a slight letdown, because you feel there's a hoax, and there *was* a hoax, a dreadful hoax. *They made you miss everything.*

We thought of life by analogy, with a journey, with a pilgrimage, which had a serious purpose at the end, and the thing was to *get* to that end, success, or whatever it is, or maybe, heaven after you're dead. But we missed the point the whole way going. It was a *musical* thing, and you were supposed to *sing* or to *dance* while the music was being played.

This is what I call the "Life begins tomorrow" narrative. "Life begins tomorrow" narrative. And I wonder, as I apply the story to myself, how many of *you* the story applies to, how many of you live by the story "life begins tomorrow."

Now our Gospel reading for today involves another story, one that comes from a disciple, not from the teaching of Jesus. Take a look, if you will, at the reading itself. It's John 6 as printed in your worship bulletin.

Let me explain a few things as I read verses 4– 13, and then ask you to help me identify what the story is, being told in this passage. John says, "Now the Passover, the Festival of the Jews..." Now, first off, right away, we have a clue as to where [the Gospel of] John was written, *not* in Palestine, and *not* in the immediate context of Jews. This suggests, as the author has to explain parenthetically, the audience to whom he was writing was in a geographic locale separated from Palestine, where people were primarily Gentiles, hence the explanation.

"But he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him. Jesus said to Philip," – and Philip's interesting. In none of the other Gospels does he have any dialog. But here, in John's Gospel, he has a voice. –

"Jesus said to Philip, 'Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?' He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do."

Now, in nerd-speak – I’m going to get into the weeds just a little bit here – in nerd-speak, we call this a “high Christology,” which is to say, according to the Gospel of John, Jesus is pictured as more divine than human.

If you go back to the Gospel of Mark, we have the “lowest Christology,” where Jesus’s humanity really comes out. For example, in a Gospel reading you heard somewhat recently, Jesus doesn’t know when the end of the age will occur. That’s Mark 13. And he can’t always perform miracles. That’s Mark 6.

Here we have a different Christology: Jesus is omniscient. He knows all.

“Philip answered him, ‘Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.’ One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, ‘There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish.’”

Now, that’s going to be really important in terms of understanding the story. We’ll come back to it in a moment.

“‘But what are they among so many people?’ Jesus said, ‘Make the people sit down.’ Now, there was a great deal of grass in the place, so they sat down, about 5,000 in all, (which, incidentally, is the number we’re expecting for Jazz on the Grass this year, minus a couple zeros. So please join us. There is an announcement for it in the bulletin, 5000 in all, or 50 in all, which is also a good number...)

“Then Jesus took the loaves, and when He had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted.”

Now, that’s an important detail. We’re talking here about abundance. “The people received as much as they wanted. When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, ‘Gather up the fragments left over so that nothing may be lost.’ So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves left by those who had eaten, they filled 12 baskets.”

Now numbers are always significant, especially in the Gospel of John, 12 baskets, 5,000 people. But before I get to those details, I want to identify, “who tells the story in this Gospel reading from John? What is the story? Or maybe a better question would be, “what is the story against which Jesus is pushing back”?

Scarcity! Philip, oh my gosh. The guy who only gets to speak in the Gospel of John says something Jesus will rebuke. Philip is assuming a scarcity narrative. “We don’t have enough. We don’t have enough to feed all these people.” So what does the story reveal? Again, fear. Scarcity.

What story then, does Jesus implicitly offer in response? Alicia Myers, a professor of New Testament from a university back East, says, “Jesus doesn’t ask *if* or *whether* the people should be fed, but *how* they can be fed.” That changes the narrative, doesn’t it? Not whether they can be fed, but *how* they can be fed. Instead of accepting Philip’s scarcity narrative, Jesus offers a *counter-narrative*, a narrative of “abundance,” which says, “We will have enough.”

Through Him, the implication seems to be, by faith, we can do all things – if the narrative we have is correct. Myers concludes in John 6, “We learn that Jesus provides more than we can anticipate, and that he does not submit to our negative stories of fear and scarcity. When we take the surplus loaves and rush out ahead of Jesus, we can quickly find ourselves overwhelmed. Jesus, though, does not abandon us. Instead, he joins us and reveals Himself to us, providing a way forward we cannot explain.”

Now, when Jesus says, “It is I” in our Gospel reading, that’s actually a mistranslation. What he’s really saying there is “I am,” which is the language that Moses hears from God with respect to who God is: “I am.” So, this is a disclosure of the divinity that is motivating Jesus to teach his disciples to think in terms of abundance rather than in terms of scarcity, to think in terms of “what if,” rather than “what cannot be.”

I find myself wondering as well with our youth group attending from Minnesota, if you ran into narratives of scarcity and fear: “How can you take all these youth to the West Coast, to Seattle, to the most godforsaken place in the whole country? How can you possibly do that in a van? You don’t even have a place to stay yet! Oh, you have a place in Olympia? That’s not really going to help you, that’s two hours away, four hours away from Seattle, depending on the traffic...”

So those are all scarcity narratives. Those are all fear narratives. And, sometimes it’s justifiable to have a little fear or caution. I totally get that, but I think we often end up on that side more, as Christians, than we do on the side of “abundance,” and “enough.”

I mentioned before that Jesus was the numbers are important in the Gospel of John. So you heard the first lesson: Elisha, the Prophet, feeds 100 people with 20 loaves of bread. In John’s narrative, Jesus, who is in prophetic succession with Elijah and Elisha, feeds how many people? 5,000? with how many loaves of bread? Five. So the author seems to be suggesting, “Look, what Jesus is doing here has been happening in the prophetic tradition; it’s just that it’s happening in a much greater way now.” So there’s a narrative purpose behind those numbers as well.

Jesus reveals Himself to us, as I said, providing a way forward we cannot explain. Not only that, let me add: God, the Father, through Christ, gives us the strength and power to follow Jesus and *change* our self-negating stories.

Consider Ephesians, 3:16–17, which I call Susan’s verse. (So, certain people have verses. You may not know it, but certain people in the congregation have verses – I haven’t assigned any of the verses about hell to any of you, don’t worry – but Susan, Susan has this verse. It came up in a conversation years ago. Whenever I read it, I think of her, just like whenever I read Joshua 1:9, I think of Seville. And just like whenever we read Psalm 121, I think of Shirley Flory. So each of these narratives, for me, at least, has a person associated with it.)

What does it say? “I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that

Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith as you are being rooted and grounded in love.”

In other words, do not be afraid. Have no fear. God will strengthen you. Christ is with you. Christ is with us, and through Him, we can accomplish together great things. That is the gospel, small g in the Gospel, big G. The good news is that Jesus empowers us to change the narrative, to live from a place of abundance rather than from a place of scarcity.

So what’s your story? What narrative do you tell yourselves that prevents you from living a more abundant life? Is it the popularity narrative, or the ageist narrative, or the entitlement narrative, or the “I’m not capable” narrative – which is the one I use – or the “work is your worth” narrative? If not, what other stories do you tell yourself, and how might our Gospel reading for today challenge your negative stories as individuals? And what about the stories we tell ourselves as a church, especially when it comes to opportunities for life and new forms of ministry – which we’ll be talking about during the announcements today?

Do we follow Philip and his narrative of scarcity, or do we follow Christ, who calls us to a more abundant life? David Lohse, the former president of Lutheran Seminary, was right. We are narrative beings. We make sense of our lives through the stories we tell of ourselves. Question is, especially as Christians, what is the dominant narrative by which you live as individuals, and by which we live as a church? Is it one of fear and scarcity, or is it one of abundance and generosity? That, my friends, is up to you.

Amen.