

FOURTH SUNDAY OF EASTER

John 10:1-10

There's a beautiful little phrase in Hebrew that might well be the title of today's sermon. It's "L'Chaim" and it means "to life."

I think I first heard that phrase at the bar mitzvah of one of my friends when I was growing up in Detroit. It was spoken at the reception as a toast by the father of my friend. "L'Chaim" – to life! And it's spoken not only at bar mitzvahs but also at bris's, birthdays, anniversaries, weddings – in fact, it's appropriate at any occasion that celebrates the joy of simply being alive.

We, too, might well say "L'Chaim" today over the joy of simply being alive. But more than that, we, who are still celebrating Easter, might also say "L'Chaim" over the joy of being alive in Christ. Jesus himself said in the last verse of today's Gospel lesson, "I came that they (namely, his people) might have life and have it abundantly."

This life which he came to give is more than physical, although because He is God we know that that is a gift from him as well. This life is spiritual and according to Christ's own words, it's abundant.

To understand and appreciate the nature of this spiritual, abundant life it's necessary to go back a chapter in John's Gospel – back to the ninth chapter where Jesus had healed a man who was blind from birth. This healing was deeply resented by the Pharisees. Because Jesus had performed this miracle on the Sabbath, they felt that he had broken God's law and was nothing more than a common sinner and an enemy of both God and the religious establishment over which they ruled. But more than just physically healing this man born blind, Jesus used the occasion to illustrate what his work was really all about – that is, he had come to give spiritual healing and sight to all who believe – to all who believe not just that he can heal physical blindness but that he can heal spiritual blindness – to all who know their need for the grace and truth which he came to bring – to all who know him as their Lord and Savior.

The Pharisees, he said, were really the ones who were blind – spiritually blind – and it was because they were that they felt no need for Jesus. They are the ones he calls thieves in our Gospel lesson for today, thieves who have come only to steal and destroy. They are not the true shepherds of God's sheep, he says, they only seek to rule over them for their own ends and purposes not for God's. He himself is the true shepherd who has come not to exploit the sheep but to lay down his life for them. Only in that way, he says, can his sheep really have life and have it abundantly.

That abundant life has very little to do with the way this world measures abundance. It has very little to do with money and power and the things that man uses to measure the "good life." Rather, it has to do with what the true measure of the "good life" is, that is,

life with God. That life for which mankind was first created and which they lost through the sin of Adam and Eve can only be restored through faith and trust in him whose atoning death and victorious resurrection opens the gate to God's sheepfold once again. And as one follows him by faith, one finds out that life lived in him is truly abundant – full of the riches of God's grace and mercy – full of the forgiveness of sins, full of salvation, full of eternal life.

It's ironic, of course, that the very religious establishment which was supposedly instituted to convey the news of this full life has been, at times, the very stumbling block to people really living that life. It was certainly that way for the Jewish church at Jesus' time as the Pharisees were more interested in the letter of the law than in its spirit. And, unfortunately, to one degree or another it has continued to be so even to this very day. In fact, we as Lutherans are even named after one who fought the same kind of fight in his own day. And even today there are those who seek to rob the sheep of God of the fullness that is rightfully theirs by their rigid attitudes that exalt the decisions of humans over the very Gospel of Jesus Christ – who are more interested in enforcing their own opinions than they are in the clear word of God – who try the Spirit and the patience of God through the exploitation of God's people for their own ends and purposes. May God save us all from such religion!

For as the people of God and as the sheep of the Good Shepherd, claimed by him through our baptism and fed and nourished by him through Word and Sacrament, God has given us all a life that neither the world nor the religion of man can ever give. It's a life that comes by grace and is filled with the mercy of God. It's a life of love and joy and peace and patience and kindness and goodness and faithfulness and self-control. It's a life, as David describes it in the 23rd Psalm, that causes our cup to overflow.

And how shall we live such a life? Is not the daily offering of our lives with all that we are and have to God with the words "L'Chaim" a fitting way to live it? Is not Jesus Christ who as our Good Shepherd laid down his life for us to be our example of laying down our lives for one another? Shall we not witness to the world in word and deed what the "good life" in Christ is all about as we minister to those in need in the world in which we live?

It's like this. A father once took his small son to visit a huge cathedral. As the two were walking down the center aisle the boy pointed at the cross above the altar and said, "Father, what is that big plus sign up there for?" "That's a cross," the father replied, "and while I never thought about it before I guess it really is a plus sign because it's there to remind us of the abundant life God has given us through His Son, Jesus."

Does the cross remind you of a big plus sign? If it does, then let's raise our lives in a never ending toast to God and say, "L'Chaim." May God grant this to us all for Jesus' sake. Amen