Sunday, April 25, 1999
THE ABUNDANT LIFE
John 10:1-10

Many of us have our favorite Bible passages. I have several: the 23rd Psalm ("The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want..."), John 3:16 ("For God so loved the world that God gave his only Son"), and John 10:10, where Jesus said, “I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.” This last one is the theme for this sermon.

What did Jesus mean when he promised an “abundant life"? To fully understand what he was telling us, let’s first consider what he did not mean. His definition of an “abundant” life was not in terms of quantity of possessions. Having an abundant life does not consist of accumulating more and more creature comforts and status symbols. It does not mean having more money, more toys, a bigger house, or a faster car.

Such things can bring us a more comfortable life, but there’s not a direct correlation between comfort in life and meaning in life or having an abundant life. I know a lot of people who live very comfortable lives, but at the same time, they live empty lives — lives that would not be considered “abundant.”

The word “comfortable” is as much misused today as the word “share.” The other day, I received a phone call from an individual soliciting support for a charity. She asked, “Are you comfortable making a pledge of $50?” I replied that I would be glad to consider a donation if she would send me some written information about the organization she was representing. She insisted that there was nothing she could send me and asked again, “Are you comfortable making a $50 pledge?”

After I explained again that I would like a brochure, she asked me to hold the line for her supervisor. The supervisor asked, “Are you or are you not comfortable with a $50 pledge?” Again I expressed my reservations. “So then,” she said, “you are uncomfortable with making a pledge?” “Yes, I am uncomfortable making a pledge until I have more information,” I answered.

Today, in many decisions, rather than asking, “Should I do this or not?” someone will ask, “Will I be comfortable if I do this?” What does that mean? What’s comfort got to do with moral decisions or doing something that needs to be done?

I was in a meeting where a male speaker used the male pronoun to refer to unspecified individuals. At the end of his presentation, a woman leaped up and all but shouted, “I’m uncomfortable with your failure to use inclusive language.” Her flushed face and clenched fists made it clear that she was more than uncomfortable. She was angry and rightly so.

Our language has become dominated by mushy words, by the soft language of psychotherapy. I read somewhere that therapists were the first to use the comfort question: “Are you comfortable talking about your father?”

This comfort language has even seeped into the church. A friend told me that she visited a church in another city. After the worship service, she exchanged greetings and small talk with the minister. A sentence or two into the conversation, the minister said, “I hope you were comfortable with the sermon.” Not uplifted! Not inspired! Not challenged to change — but comfortable! The fact is, some of the best sermons that I need to hear are those which will

make me very uncomfortable. It used to be said that one of the purposes of a sermon was to "comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable."

What are we saying to ourselves and others when we use being comfortable as a standard for moral judgments or right conduct? Comfort is a matter of taste, a matter of feeling; moral judgments and important decisions are not.

If helping homeless people or visiting someone who is dying in a nursing home puts me on edge, makes me feel gloomy and uncomfortable, it does not follow that I have no obligation to do so. It only tells me that helping people in such situations does not come naturally to me and that I had better do it anyway. Some of the things that make us most uncomfortable are the things that we most need to do.

You can be sure that when Jesus said, "I came that you might have life and have it abundantly," he was talking about more than being "comfortable."

A second definition of an abundant life that Jesus did not have in mind is that it consists of being successful — climbing the ladder of social and vocational mobility. This does not mean that all success is bad and not to be sought, but Jesus had more in mind when he promised us an abundant life. You can be very successful in worldly terms but have an unhappy, abysmal life.

When we define an abundant life primarily in terms of success, it has often been symbolized by the Horatio Alger stories, whose heroes embody the virtues and blessings of success. Alger's heroes were aggressive, individualistic, lucky, hardworking, honest enough to secure the trust they needed to succeed, and of course, masculine.

The abundant life in terms of success is usually defined primarily in terms of making lots of money, having the right kind of connections, and achieving social power through success in the business world or one of the professions.

Incidentally, the real Horatio Alger had his own troubles. Despite the fact that his popular success stories brought him wealth and fame, his own life was little short of tragic. He never married or experienced the fulfillments of genuine mutuality with men or women. He had two known affairs with women who remained married to their husbands; he eventually suffered serious mental illness and spent his last days in the kind of boarding houses from which his successful fictional heroes had escaped. His was not an "abundant life."

In 1923, eight of the world's wealthiest and most successful men met at the Edgewater Beach Hotel in Chicago. At the time, they controlled more money than was contained in the U.S. Treasury.

Charles Schwab, president of the largest independent steel company, died broke. Arthur Cutten, greatest wheat speculator, died abroad insolvent. Richard Whitney, president of the New York Stock Exchange, died just after his release from Sing Sing Prison. Albert Fall, a member of the President's cabinet, was pardoned from prison to die at home. Jessie Livermore, greatest bear on Wall Street, committed suicide. Leon Fraser, president of the Bank of International Settlements, committed suicide. Ivan Krueger, head of the world's greatest monopoly, committed suicide.

The questions to ask about these two definitions of what constitutes an abundant life are: Does life really work that way? Does getting and spending truly produce satisfaction? Does it hold up in the end? Let's be honest — for some of us, it does, temporarily.

But in the long run, are these definitions big enough to live by, especially when the tough times come? Can they hold the weight of human life? In a moment's reflection, we all recognize that they cannot.

For one thing, such definitions are not idealistic enough. There is no call to sacrifice, to stretch, to long for something higher and deeper than meager concerns and desires.

They are also not realistic enough. All the toys, trips, promotions, and possessions we can get cannot carry us successfully through the pains, disappointments, losses, and reversals that, sooner or later, will be a part of our lives. They cannot equip us to face the agonies, confusions, and temptations that come to everyone.

What then did Jesus mean when he talked about inviting you and me into an "abundant life"?

First of all, in the Bible passage read as the text for this sermon, Jesus described himself as the door or the gate of an abundant life and also as the doorman or gatekeeper. In another place, he said, "I am the way, the truth, and the life."

In other words, Jesus was saying, "Look at my life — the way I love people, the way I relate to people, the way I let the Spirit of God work in me. Follow my example, and you are on the way to finding an abundant life."

Gates and gatekeepers, doors and doormen have a double function — one is to screen those who enter, to keep out those who are not welcome. The second function, and the one Jesus is talking about, is to open the door or gate, to welcome those who are supposed to be there, to invite people in, to offer hospitality. That's why I appreciate the inscription over the main front doors of this church: "Come unto me all you that labor and are heavy laden, and I will give you rest." These words of Jesus remind us that we are always to practice an "open door" policy in our congregation, especially to those who are weary and worn down by life. Like Jesus, we are inviting all people to enter so that we can help them find an "abundant life."

The doors of this church are open, but each person has to decide whether or not to walk through that doorway. When Jesus described himself as the door or the gate of abundant life, he was giving us the invitation to walk through that open gate.

By contrast, Jesus also noted that some people try to find or enter abundant life by climbing in another way, and he called them thieves and bandits. They avoid the gate he offers. The joys of abundant living require proper access. There are no shortcuts that work.

Two years ago this coming fall, Princess Diana and Mother Teresa died within a week of each other. The ambulance that carried Mother Teresa's body to the church for her funeral had the single word "Mother" on its windshield. There could be no more fitting epitaph for the woman who made herself a surrogate mother to the wretched of the earth, in whom she saw the image of God. Through her ministry and influence, she ultimately built over 500 hospitals, clinics, shelters, and youth centers in 100 countries to serve the poor, sick, and unwanted.

The news of Mother Teresa's death came from Calcutta on the eve of Diana Spencer's funeral in London. What a contrast. Diana was tall and beautiful, born into a wealthy English family. Mother Teresa was just under five feet tall, plain, and the daughter of an Albanian grocer in Macedonia.

Diana was married to a prince in a fairy tale wedding with gilded carriages and an escort of Redcoats. Mother Teresa was first known as Sister Teresa when she became a nun in 1928, and this event was unrecognized by the media. She was an unknown person for many years. Diana suffered psychological problems and a failed marriage. Whatever personal troubles Mother Teresa might have had were submerged in her faith and her devotion to the diseased and dying victims of Calcutta's slums, to whom she tried to give some solace.

Diana met her death in a limousine, driven by a drunken driver, traveling at four times the legal speed limit, an adventure presumably condoned by her playboy lover, who also died. Mother Teresa died quietly, attended by members of her religious order, the Society of Missionaries of Charity, after complaining of shortness of breath. When she died, Mother Teresa owned nothing but her rosary beads and her distinctive white and blue sari.

According to Jesus' definition, who had the more abundant life, Princess Diana or Mother Teresa?

These are two polar opposites. Our lives fall somewhere between, and each one of us has our own uniqueness, created in the image of God, and we have to find our own way. But we need models, ideals.

Here's what's been a help to me in finding my way toward the abundant life offered by following the way of Jesus. In one of his teachings in the Sermon on the Mount, Jesus said, "Be perfect, therefore, even as your heavenly Father is perfect."

For many years, I misunderstood that word "perfect." I identified it with "perfectionism." Then I learned the good news about the word "perfect" as used in the New Testament. The word in Greek that has been translated as "perfect" does not mean to set forth an impossible goal or the perfectionism that would have me strive for it at any cost. It is taken from a Greek word meaning complete, entire, full-grown. To those who originally heard it, the word meant "mature" rather than what we mean today by "perfect."

To be perfect in the sense that Jesus meant it is to make room for growth, for the changes that bring us to maturity, to ripeness. To mature is to lose adolescent self-consciousness and self-centeredness so as to be able to make a gift of oneself as a parent, teacher, friend, spouse, or coworker. Perfection, in a Christian sense, means becoming mature enough to give ourselves to others. Whatever we have, no matter how little it seems, is something that can be given away. This sort of perfection demands that we become fully ourselves as God would have us — mature, ripe, full, ready for what befalls us, for whatever is to come. Then you are on the way to finding an abundant life. Amen.