

Title: "Live Enthusiastically! Celebrate the Gift of Life!"

In the gospel of John, Jesus tells about shepherds and thieves. The thief must be sneaky and climb over the wall.

The shepherd can go in by the gate, and lead the sheep out in a group.

It's a simple image, but I'd never really thought that much about the thief before. I'd always focused on the shepherd. But when I thought about the contrast, it really hit me: what would it be like to be a sheep-stealer?

1. Fear

First, a thief who steals sheep would always be afraid of being caught. There would be anxiety in the stealing itself, so that no one would see you. Then there'd be anxiety in holding onto the sheep, for fear it would give you away. Sheep must have been branded or marked somehow, so you could be caught red-handed far away from the sheep pen. And if you were caught, you could be punished. In fact the Old Testament does list the amputation of a hand as punishment for stealing – although that was seldom done in Jesus' day.

2. Anonymity/hiding yourself

Second, the thief would have to go hiding his face. The thief could not proudly go about in his own identity, but would have to wear a mask or something during and after the crime. Hiding your identity is something you do because of shame or guilt.

In yesterday's paper I read about the father who shot his son as an intruder, because the son was sneaking around at his aunts in a ski mask, and had a knife. If his father had seen his face, he never would have shot him.

3. Go around during the night instead of the day

In a similar way, the thief has to go around during the night, instead of during the day.

4. Always focusing on what somebody else has

Lastly, the thief is always thinking about what someone else has. A thief can never be content with what he has, but always thinks about what someone else has that he wants. What a recipe for unhappiness.

Aside from the fact that stealing is wrong, and it's against the ten commandments, being a thief is just a sad way to live.

It's no wonder, then, that Jesus talks about abundant life after he's talked about the shepherd. The shepherd is a huge contrast to the thief. The shepherd experiences:

1. The reward of being recognized – the sheep know him. The sheep hear his voice and follow. Even if it's just sheep, it's good to be recognized as someone good, someone worth trusting and following.

2. Going around during the day and night.

Second, the shepherd experiences the blessing of being able to go around day and night. There's no hiding. The shepherd can be who he is.

3. The focus is on taking care of God's creatures.

Third, the shepherd gets to take care of God's creatures. Instead of doing something harmful to God's creatures, the shepherd gets to help them. It's a life-giving occupation. It's a life-protecting occupation, keeping the sheep safe from wolves and thieves.

4. Trust in God to provide.

Lastly, the shepherd has the joy of trusting in God to provide. Rather than focusing on what he doesn't have, the shepherd experiences directly what God provides: the grass for grazing, the water to give the sheep to drink, the lambs in the spring, the wool for clothing, and so on.

The shepherd experiences abundance, because of a relationship of trust in God to provide for him and for the sheep.

When you think about it, Jesus said a lot about living life abundantly, enthusiastically.

"He said, . . . truly I tell you, if you have faith the size of a mustard seed, you will say to this mountain, 'Move from here to there,' and it will move; and nothing will be impossible for you.'" Matthew 17:20, NRSV.

Jesus also said, "With God all things are possible."

Francie Baltazar-Schwartz wrote a story about her friend, Jerry. This is the way Francie writes it:

Jerry was the kind of guy you love to hate. He was always in a good mood and always had some thing positive to say. When someone would ask him how he was doing, he would reply, "If I were any better, I would be twins." Francie said that "Seeing his style really made me curious, so one day I went up to Jerry and asked him, "I don't get it! You can't be a positive person all of the time. How do you do it?" Jerry replied, "Each morning I wake up and say to myself, 'Jerry, you have two choices today. You can choose to be in a good mood or you can choose to be in a bad mood.' I choose to be in a good mood. Each time something bad happens, I can choose to be a victim or I can choose to learn from it. I choose to learn from it. Every time someone come complaining, I can choose to accept their complaining or I can point out the positive side of life. I choose the positive side of life."

"Life is all about choices. When you cut away all the junk, every situation is a choice. You choose how you react to situations. You choose how people will affect your mood. You choose to be in a good mood or a bad mood. The bottom line – It's your choice how you live life."

Francie told that years later Jerry did something you're never supposed to do in the restaurant business – he left the back door open, and was held up at gun point by three armed robbers. While trying to open the safe, his hand, shaking from nervousness, slipped off the combination. The robbers panicked and shot him. Thankfully, he was found rather quickly and rushed to the local trauma center. After 18 hours of surgery and weeks in Intensive Care, Jerry was released from the hospital with fragments of bullets still lodged in his body.

Six months later, Francie came to visit Jerry to see how he was getting along in his recovery. His response: "If I were any better, I'd be twins. Want to see my scars?" She said, "I declined; but I did ask him what was going through his mind when the robbery took place?" He said, "The first thing that went through my mind was that I should have locked the door. Then, as I lay on the floor, I remembered that I had two choices – I could choose to live, or I could choose to die."

"Were you scared?"

Jerry replied, "The paramedics were great. They kept telling me I was going to be fine. But when they wheeled me into the emergency room, and I saw the expressions on the faces of the doctors and nurses, (then) I got really scared. In their eyes I read, 'He's a dead man.' I knew I needed to take action."

"What did you do?"

Sermon, September 30, 2012 John 10:1-10, Romans 8:31-39

"Well, there was a big, burly nurse shouting questions at me." She asked if I was allergic to anything?" and I replied "Yes!" The doctors and nurses stopped working as they waited for my reply. I took a deep breath and yelled, "Bullets!" Over their laughter, I told them, "I'm choosing to live. (Now) operate on me as if I am alive, not dead."

You don't need to be heroic to live life that way.

When I officiated at Mary Sramek's memorial service this past week, I asked the family if she ever complained. They said, "no," even though she'd had a hard life. There were many opportunities for Mary to turn bitter, but instead she sang hymns and trusted God.

She had a lot of little sayings. One of them was:

"When you go to bed at night and wake up in the morning, you made another day."

She'd also say:

When you can get up in the morning, it's a good day.

Some people approach it in a more negative way, and say: "What doesn't kill you makes you stronger." But that's focusing on the negative, instead of the blessings. And the blessings are greater, on the whole, than the negative stuff.

Jesus puts it positively:

The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." John 10:1-10, NRSV.

In Romans, Paul put it this way:

"What then are we to say about these things? If God is for us, who is against us? He who did not withhold his own Son, but gave him up for all of us, will he not with him also give us everything else?"

Knowing all that, let's choose to live abundantly, joyfully, enthusiastically.

Amen.