

Primary Reading: Luke 12:13-21

As a young child, one of my favorite pets was the first pet for which I had complete responsibility. It was a hamster named Miss Debbie. For a little tiny rodent, Miss Debbie was pretty smart and surprisingly, I learned quite a lot from her.

Of course, one of the first things I learned was wheel maintenance. There was a metal wheel in Miss Debbie's aquarium. And when it wasn't well-tuned, it made this high-pitched squeal when the hamster ran on it... which was usually all night long. So I fast learned where to apply a little oil so the wheel made just a slight hum, but still all night long.

To be honest, as I think about it I'm not sure when Miss Debbie slept. Because all night long she ran on her wheel and all day long she seemed to spend on one of two other activities: either making a nest or chewing on whatever happened to be in front of her. Plastic, wood, or metal – manufactured or naturally grown, I learned that hamsters chew through just about anything they can reach with their teeth.

Which is how I also learned how to prevent her from escaping her aquarium home, usually it was just after she'd escaped. A good lid on the aquarium was often chewed through. It had more to do with preventing Miss Debbie from being able to climb up to the lid in the first place.

And in hindsight, I learned a much deeper truth about hamsters... not to mention, humans. Much of our life is spent on one of two things – being absorbed in what's placed before us, we might call it running the rat race or pursuing the *good life* and trying to be liberated, touching something that involves more than just ourselves, we might call it pursuing the *abundant life*.

*The land of a rich man produced richly. Jesus tells us. And he thought to himself, 'What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?'* "Should I be plagued with this problem!" we might joke with our neighbor when we hear this parable of a man caught up in pursuing the good life.

You know, depending on how ‘average’ a North American we are, depending on how much TV we will watch in the next three days, how much time we will spend on the internet, how many billboards we will drive by... we’ll probably hear and see and be exposed to around 20 hours of messages inviting us to pursue the “good life,” to run the hamster race, to consume what’s in front of us, to “relax, eat, drink, and be merry.”

Think for a moment about what you really need... I heard a news report that 5% of Americans *need* a plasma TV. It’s sounds kind of ridiculous, but what have you been convinced you *need* in order to be happy?

Is it a slightly bigger house or more room to fit all your possessions like the rich man in the parable? Is it a better career, a better spouse, kids who behave themselves, or parents who really understand what you’re going through?

Or ask yourself this, What does your neighbor seem to have that you don’t? What’s your answer to that most basic of desires, that most primal of impulses: “If only I had this, *then* I could relax, *then* I would be truly happy”?

There really is an unfair advantage between this desire and that other desire that I noticed in my hamster, Miss Debbie. Ad executives get paid pretty good money to tell us and show us what we need just a little more of in order to be happy.

But surely we can’t *only* blame the media for using these hungers we have for the good life. If we’re to move beyond what Jesus calls “storing up treasures for ourselves” and grow into what Jesus describes as “being rich toward God” perhaps we need to realize that we are as much to blame as anyone. It’s simply who we are in our bones, in our DNA, in our flesh, in our souls. We are people susceptible to thinking that *storing up treasures for ourselves* is actually *being rich toward God* – we are easily confused between the “good life” and the “*abundant life*.”

It is this, as much as anything, that we mean when we make our confession. Perhaps we might just as well say, “we confess that we are in bondage to the *good life* and cannot by ourselves reach the *abundant life*.”

There is another famous, ancient parable about two people who live most of their life in a dark cave. One day, one of the two people finds a way to escape the cave and sees for the first time: the sun, butterflies, flowers, and sees her own body – her own hands and hair – for the first time. When this person returns to the cave to report this brilliant new world, how will she describe this experience to her neighbor who still lives in the dark cave?

Maybe she will begin by trying to describe sunlight. “Where is it?” the neighbor will ask? “Is it below like the floor of the cave or beside like the walls or above like the roof?” “No, it’s nowhere like that, and yet it’s everywhere” she will reply. “Well, what does it feel like?” The neighbor will ask. “Is it cold like the rock of the cave?” “No, it is... it is warm. It is warm like... like my hand touching your face.”

You get the idea... We struggle along in our hamster aquariums, like dwelling in caves, all the while with an *abundant life* waiting for us to experience. We get a taste, a touch, a smell of the *abundant life* here and there, but as we tell our stories of experiencing the abundant life it is like one blind person leading another blind person to water.

Because the *abundant life* is shrouded in mystery like the sacrament of baptism shrouded in water or the table sacrament: body and blood present in bread & beverage. And this is why it’s so much easier to say what the abundant life is *not*. It is not a pile of toys or a house the size of a McMansion, or even a job where you are well respected. But what is it?

It is more like... We might say it is more like “being rich towards God.” It is more like... like the warm hand of a friend or partner touching your cheek. For me this week, it was a little like spending a few days with my parents, my sister, and my brother and sister-in-law and their 18 month old daughter Hailey, who happens to also be my goddaughter. It was having the privilege to put Hailey to bed, reading *Good Night Moon* and kissing her on the cheek in her crib. This is what the *abundant life* is like, shrouded in mystery as it is.

And shrouded in mystery as the abundant life is, it is a strange mystery that often when we lose it, we find it. Often when we are most impoverished, we discover the abundant life. Often when we die – a little or a lot – we are brought to this new life.

It's because of this mystery that often when we are faced with an illness like terminal cancer, we begin to realize what a gift health is. Or why often when we lose a loved one to an illness like this, in the losing we realize what a gift they are and were. Or why when a bridge collapses in tragedy like it did in Minneapolis this week, we realize what a precious gift life is and how much we can take it for granted.

God doesn't warn us about putting our trust in riches just because God wants us to be poor and starving. God warns us about putting our trust in riches because God is concerned that while we feast on riches we're starving ourselves spiritually...

and while we're starving spiritually, like people who have lived their whole lives in spiritual caves, we have neighbors near and far who are starving literally. Dying of malnourishment or struggling to get access to basic health care, they are like people who have lived their whole lives in caves of hunger. And both literal malnourishment and spiritual malnourishment are treatable conditions.

So let us give thanks for the lives with which we've been blessed abundantly. Let us give ourselves abundantly to that God-given passion for the *abundant life* – it's a life of liberation, of freedom, of helping where we can to pull neighbors out and be pulled out of caves of poverty... and hearing stories from our neighbors – how they have experienced this mysterious, *abundant life*.

Amen.