

ALMEDA WRIGHT

Trinity Institute, *The Good News Now – Evolving with the Gospel of Jesus*

Good morning.

(Chorus of good morning)

“The thief comes only to steal, kill, and destroy, but I came that you may have life and have it more abundantly.” So what is the good news about abundant life? Many popular discussions of abundant life often take place within a narrow perspective of Christianity and either tend toward prosperity teaching – in other words, material abundance, or toward spiritual abundance, or eschatological concerns. And if I’m honest, neither of these perspectives have really offered me a vision or a narrative that was very persuasive, and so for a while I have actually avoided using the concept or engaging in this conversation around what is abundant life. But as I started thinking about the things that are of concern and are central to my work, which are adolescent spiritual concerns, or the questions of what is God’s will for humanity and creation, and what is the work of religious leaders, and educators, and theologians, with regards to how we can make a difference in the world, this idea of abundant life, of what Jesus intends for us kept coming up. So I’m going to invite you this morning to walk with me, as I wrestle with a couple of questions around what is abundant life? Why is it important? Why is it important for adolescent spirituality? And here’s a question: What can adolescents teach us about abundant life?

Religious educator and theologian Thomas Groom argues that Jesus summarizes the meaning of the reign of God in John’s Gospel, in this verse that I just quoted for you. And he says that Jesus’ purpose, according to this verse, for coming to earth is for us to have life, and for us to have life more abundantly. But Groom posits that God’s will for our lives is simply – or not so simply, once you hear this – that God intends the best of everything for everyone all the time, and the integrity of God’s creation. I’ll give it to you again: God intends the best of everything for everyone all the time, and the integrity of God’s creation.

So I recently discussed this quote from Groom with a couple of students of mine, and his understanding of abundant life. Now these were seminarians and some older undergraduate students. And the discussion was full of wonder, and amazement, and a not too small amount of disbelief. See, this simple statement of what God intends for our lives is overwhelming. It’s overwhelming for several reasons. If we agree, if we follow that that’s what God’s will is, and that’s what God wants for our lives, then we have to follow it through to completion.

For example, if that’s what God intends for us, then that means that should be how we should live. So if God intends for the integrity of creation, then guess what, we’ve got to figure out what it means to be involved and part of this created order. If God’s will or

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intention is for there to be justice and peace, then we have to do the work of justice, and we have to figure out how we promote peace in this society. If God's will is for all to be fed, then we have got to do the work of eradicating hunger, and so on.

So my students and I were in awe of this promise of Jesus and this idea that Jesus wants for us to have the best of everything all the time, because we had questions. How does that translate into how we should live, and these pragmatic questions really made us think is it possible, is it real, can we even get towards this? And by the way, the pragmatic questions are very helpful, and very necessary, and that's where I always show up. I am that type A personality that wants to be a fixer, that wants to typically line up to help you work on the logistics. If you're too busy dreaming and casting vision, I'll tune out. But if you tell me here's what we're working on, I'll help. So I always go towards the pragmatic question of how do we do this? If this is abundant life, how do we do it?

But if I'm honest, these pragmatic questions also indicate a level of disbelief, or sense that if we humans cannot figure out how to make it happen, then it cannot be done, or if a solution is not readily apparent or achievable immediately, then we should just give up hope of striving for it. But the idea of abundant life is intended to challenge all that we can do and even imagine. Abundant life, or the purpose of Jesus' coming, was not simply for us to meet a nice guy. "Hey, buddy Jesus." No. The purpose of Jesus' coming is for us to think about, to re-imagine what it means, what it entails for us to live into a reality that is so drastically different from our current realities. So as I walked with my students through this conversation I recognized that many of their responses indicated some clear, if you will, drawbacks for us, some clear indicators of why imagining or living into abundant life is so difficult for us.

For example, how our understanding of the best of everything is kind of built on an assumption that having the best is dependent on someone else having something less. We understand that in order for there to be best there has to be something that was okay, something that was better, and something that's best, or at least that's how we think it works. So we really didn't understand, and our definition of best is that it has to be better than something else, or typically, in our minds, we have to have something that is more than what someone else has. So in other words, it's hard for us or remains difficult for us to imagine a communal understanding of abundant life for the totality of creation because we are often wed unknowingly to an individual vision of abundance as more than the other. And this is a reality check that most of us don't want. And so I was actually fascinated when I was reading and thinking about this that Sallie McFague, in her honest – very honest – narrative about life abundant, rethinking theology, and economy for a planet in peril, she points out that one of the first steps to living or to having life abundantly is that we must imagine another way to live, another way to live on planet Earth. But for me, reimagining abundant life requires that we ask an even more basic question, not just what does it look like, but an internal question to our understanding of who God is and what God desires. For

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me, we have to begin with the basic question of do we actually trust God? Do we trust that God could really want the best for everyone all the time? Do we start from an understanding that the good news of Jesus is for all to be free? Not simply for some, or whoever can work the hardest or strategize the best.

See, in other places I've raised the question of is God big enough, or more accurately, is our conception of God big enough? And this points to the ways that many of the young people that I work with and research limit their God talk, limit their understandings of God to particular areas of their lives. And I began, you know, to question and think about that maybe these young people and, of course, by direct indication, the adults in their lives, because they reflect the adults in their lives, don't fully see the bigness of God, and thus, they put God in a box to get pulled out only on holidays, some Sundays, before a soccer game, or a calculus test. And so to be honest, I see many similarities between compartmentalizing God, and my class' reaction to Thomas Groom's vision of abundant life.

This understanding that God wants the best of everything is really hard for us to grapple with, because we struggle with imagining what it is that that abundant life can be, or even imagining that there would be someone, some divine entity, some God that would want that for us. Is it possible? Is it true? Is it real that there would be someone who would will for us to have life that looked like this? So even while I was noting the similarities, these questions or these kind of reactions always push me to explore and to say you know what? Let me stop. Let me pause. Let me listen more carefully to ask so what are we learning when we talk to young people, or what do we learn when we see this compartmentalization, or this putting God, or limiting the practices of God.

Now often in my attempts to listen to the voices of young people and the narratives of adolescents, I listen with an ear for what the Christian church can teach youth, and how we can empower youth. But other times I am reminded to listen for what youth can teach us, and how their experiences and perspectives can empower us to be better, to be a better society, to be more faithful Christians, and communities of faith as well. And, of course, given the time constraints I'm not going to look at American adolescents, in general, but I'm going to look very closely, I'm going to share with you the narrative of one young woman. Please, please, please note that I am in no way arguing that her narrative is indicative of all young people around the globe, but what I want us to do, or what I want to try to parse out with you is to give you an example from her voice of the significance and power of theological reflection with, for, and by young people.

So this young woman's narrative and wisdom, by the way, has pushed me to rethink my understanding of abundant life. About five years ago I interviewed a young woman from the Southeast. She was a rising high school senior at the time, and now she's a senior in college. And I will call her Kiera for sake of her anonymity. Now Kiera was and remains

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an amazing human being. She grew up in a fairly impoverished and crime-infested neighborhood. Her parents split up when she was fairly young. Her schools were labeled failing, and many of her teachers and administrators were actually really afraid to push too hard or to try too much, because it might garner unwarranted feedback, or too much negative publicity. But Kiera was also more than aware of all the concerns, and violence, and death around her, and she recounted in these interviews vividly her experiences of the ineptitude of the adults in her life, and the administrators and the response to shooting deaths of one of her classmates. And so I want to quote her at length here.

Kiera states, “Well, we were coming home one day from church and I saw a whole bunch of police, and everything, and I just overlooked it, and when I got to school it was like, you know, Shelly, you know, Michelle, she got shot in the head. Everybody was scared, and they thought whoever shot her was going to retaliate, but I think what happened is that people get so used to hearing about death that they become numb. So it wasn’t any coming together, or crying, or moaning. It wasn’t like that. My teachers, they said, ‘Here, we’re going to put up this big piece of paper and we’re going to put up ‘Miss you,’ and give a shout out to Shelley.’”

“But then after that another young girl got shot, but she didn’t die, and so people get used to hearing about death, especially young death, being in the wrong place at the wrong time, and there’s no remorse. Nothing like ‘let’s come together.’ And if I don’t watch out,” Kiera says, “I kind of get numb, too.” The gloom and doom, though, of Kiera’s narrative was not the most significant part. It was a very vivid part of her life story, but that wasn’t it. When I met her, she exuded joy and positive energy, and energy that I could not figure out, one that I probably still cannot grasp, but as I listened to Kiera, as I listened with her I encountered a young woman whose faith was so strong, whose hope in God was so secure that all of the gloom around her paled in comparison.

Now my suspicions, analytical, academic Christian, progressive Christian self wondered if Kiera had simply bought into some pie-in-the-sky theology that wasn’t truly empowering her or that wasn’t truly helping her to address her immediate situation in life’s circumstances. But Kiera kept challenging my assumptions, and reminding me of the power of hope and faith in the face of violence, and corruption, and all kinds of other injustices that many of us will never, ever be able to fully understand. Kiera trusted God, and believed God, and believed in the promise of abundant life. Not material prosperity or simple individualistic advancement. Kiera’s understanding of abundant life encapsulated a genuine concern for people’s souls, for connections to the divine, to the living Christ, and the ability to live peacefully in the community today. She spoke of feeling call to witness to her friends at school, because she was worried about their souls, and worried about what would happen to them after they die.

Now I was completely uneasy with the idea of prosthetizing, or witnessing, or trying to

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convert her friends, but it dawned on me that her daily experiences of living with violence and shooting deaths were very real, and that offers a very different lens or set of lenses for her concern about what happens to people when or after they die. But her witness also included a call to help people think through the causes of violence, and alternatives to violence. Kiera's witness and narrative also included a very robust hope that things could get better. Kiera pushed against my general feeling of uneasiness and inadequacy when it comes to trying to hold all the narratives that young people bring you. And so even as I tried to follow the interview protocol and continue to ask her, "So what's your understanding of the role of the church? What's your understanding of God, and where do you see God in the midst of this?" And I expected, honestly, that all I would get was an uncertainty or a sense of, "I don't know where God is," because that was essentially what I was feeling.

But Kiera says, and I quote her here, "We are just vessels of God, and if God is going to work, if we want to see a difference in the world, then we have got to let God work fully through us. We have to take the limits off. Like, if we're going to do it, we've got to go all the way out. We have got to take the limits off, so we've got to let God fully use us to let a change come." For many youth like Kiera, life is not just a spiritual construct or a set of middle class values. Life is survival. Life is the day-to-day breathing in and out, and being grateful for your very next breath. And so I was cautious, and I wondered what does it mean for us to proclaim abundant life in the midst of the news that another young person on America's streets or around the globe has been gunned down. What does it mean for us to read John 10:10 for any of the list of young people who have died this year? But I listen to Kiera, and Kiera's narrative offers a vision of abundant life as finding hope and being hope when we take the limits off and begin to be and do what God wants us to be. Abundant life requires that we take the limits off, and that we actually get out of the way of ourselves so that the will of God can become manifest. But this is hard, and it's hard and difficult for a lot of reasons. Our lives are constantly controlled by a mythology of scarcity, a mythology that we don't have enough, and often we think that that's only in terms of material resources or ideas, the mythology of scarcity also permeates our life of faith.

Over, and over, and over again we wrestle with the questions of can God do it, or is God big enough, or do we have what we need. And I was reminded just this week that most of us are governed by an idea that there's not enough, but the reality is that the biblical witness offers us accounts of God's generosity God's abundance over and over again, and we are the ones that are saying, "But no, no, no, we don't have enough." Our warped vision of abundance life or living the good life has now been morphed into hoarding, even spiritually. So we ask this question: Do I have enough faith? Can I trust God fully? Is God big enough? And I hear the voice that says, from Kiera, "All you need is faith the size of a grain of a mustard seed. All you've got to do is take the limits off God."

So at the core of our mythology of scarcity and our fear of what abundant life could be, we

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ask the question: Do we trust God? Not really. Do we believe God has empowered us? Not really. But today, I ask can you listen and learn from the public theological witness of a 16-year-old girl from a crime-infested community in the Southeast, as she boldly affirms, “But we could be so powerful. We could be so great if we just came together, if we just took the limits off God.” That, for me, is good news. That, for me, is the good news of abundant life, that there is a God who intends the best of everything for everyone all the time, and the integrity of creation, and we can live into that vision when and as we learn to take the limits off. Thank you.