

ABUNDANT LIFE

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“Have you ever seen anything like this before?” We recently posed this question to an investment manager who for thirty-five years has excelled at handling other people’s money. We were referring, of course, to the economic downturn.

“I’ve seen all of the pieces before,” he said. “But I’ve never seen them all together like they are now. It’s an economic condition no one has seen before. And no one has the answer to it. We just have to try things to see whether they work, and if they don’t, try something else. We just have to keep trying until finally the economy begins moving upward.”

His answer to our next question surprised us. Our question was, “Apart from the drop in most investors’ net worth, what is the greatest challenge you personally face in today’s economic environment?”

His response was, “Helping my clients manage their expectations.”

He went on to describe why that is so important in uncertain economic times. “People are nervous. If their investment manager doesn’t help them manage their own emotions, and their own expectations, the situation can quickly escalate into one of great stress for them. They need to talk about their fears and anxieties, and they need to know that someone is listening to them. For my clients, I’m that someone.”

So one morning a week clients can walk in to his office on their way to work or other commitments – no appointment necessary – sit down, and talk about their fears and concerns, alone or in company with others, depending upon how many show up. They also share what they are hearing from their own circle of acquaintances.

The investment manager listens, and he talks about the steps he is taking and the latest word in the broader investment community. By his own admission, he does not have definitive answers, but he can provide information, positive or negative, in a timely way, and listen to their concerns and fears. He tells it as it is; they express their point of view. Out of it comes a different perspective for all of them, a different way of living through this challenging time.

In addition to the open door, he is on the phone frequently with clients, for much the same purpose.

For him, communication is a key part of helping his clients manage their expectations.

Jesus used a similar approach. He was constantly communicating, with his disciples, with people he met along the road, with the religious authorities, in places of worship, in the streets, and in people's homes.

In these troubled economic times, we can learn a great deal about how to live by paying attention to what he said.

Let's focus on just one truth. "I am come," said Jesus, "that they might have life, and have it more abundantly." (John 10:10).

Many of us have defined "abundant life" for ourselves, only to find recently that reality does not match our definition. The "abundant" part seems to have diminished, and we are left with anxiety and uncertainty.

Almost unconsciously, we developed our definition of "abundant life" during a period of relative economic stability and prosperity. It was easy to think that we deserved what we got, because we earned it with our own intelligence, or hard work, or planning and strategizing.

But that assumption suddenly doesn't seem to work anymore. During this economic downturn we are working just as hard as before. We didn't suddenly become dumb and incapable of thinking. Nor are we less focused on using our skill to get ahead. What previously seemed ours by right has suddenly been taken from us, or at least there is that threat. Our own input remains unchanged; but suddenly the output has been reduced.

Jesus had a radically different definition of "abundant life," and how it is obtained. We would do well to learn from him.

Most glaringly, he demonstrated by his life as well as by his words that "abundant life" does not always entail great wealth. After all, he had less than foxes and birds have. "Foxes have holes, and birds of the air have nests, but the Son of Man has no place to lay his head." Yet in that fact, Jesus could point to the true meaning of abundant life: "Look at the birds of the air; they do not sow or reap or store away in barns, and yet your heavenly Father feeds them. Are you not much more valuable than they?"

And if God clothes the grass of the field with a splendour that outshines Solomon in all his riches, "will he not much more clothe you?"

Jesus nailed down what abundant life really is. It consists first of seeking after something. For most of us, that isn't such a difficult concept. We spend much of our life seeking after something: love, meaning, a sense of belonging, wealth, possessions, the perfect body, the ideal weight, a job that is fulfilling ... The list goes on and on, and just when we think we've gotten what we were seeking, a new desire arises. So, 'seeking' we can understand. However, we may need to seek something far different from what we are accustomed to.

Secondly, abundant life consists in receiving. That's a concept that's harder for many of us. We're used to taking; we're not so good at receiving. Perhaps an analogy from football can be helpful. Why is it that certain positions on a football team are known as

“receivers” rather than “takers”? Why not a wide taker, instead of a wide receiver? Why not a pass taker, instead of a pass receiver?

Simply because the receiver has to wait until the thing coming to him or her (in this analogy, a football), actually arrives. He or she can move toward the object, can shift course so as to be in line with the object, can even be in a position for the object to take a very short route instead of having to travel long yardage or for a prolonged period of time. But in the end, the object has to arrive. It has to be received; it cannot be taken. No amount of impatience can close the gap to zero between the one sending the object and the one receiving it. To continue the football analogy, even a running back ‘taking’ the ball from the quarterback has to receive it; he or she cannot just take it from the arms of the quarterback. There is an element of thrusting the object toward the one receiving.

So, according to Jesus, abundant life consists of seeking something, and it consists of receiving something from somewhere outside ourselves. But Jesus goes on to explain that there is still more to abundant life. There is also ceasing. Simply stopping doing what one is prone to do.

“Seek first his (God the Father’s) kingdom and his righteousness, and all these things will be given to you as well. Therefore, do not worry about tomorrow, for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough trouble of its own.” (Matthew 6:33, 34, emphasis added)

According to Jesus, “the author and perfecter of our faith” (Hebrews 12:2), abundant life consists of focusing on God’s kingdom, not ours. The concerns of his kingdom, the focus of his attention, the desires of his heart, are often diametrically opposite to our own. But if there is one lesson we should be learning from this economic downturn, it’s that the concerns and focus and desires of men and women have very real limitations in terms of their ability to deliver security and hope and ‘abundant life’.

Jesus talked about God's concerns - reaching out to our neighbour, caring about the hungry, the naked, the thirsty, the poor, those who are imprisoned by a myriad of things, not only iron bars or electronic monitoring devices. If God is concerned about people, experiencing major difficulties, we need to be as well, if we are to enjoy "abundant life". That is what God's kingdom is about. It's about loving God with everything in us, and loving our neighbour as ourself.

But when we do that, 'what's in it for me?' (to put the question somewhat crassly).

Jesus answers that, too. "So do not worry, saying, 'What shall we eat?' or 'What shall we drink?' or 'What shall we wear?'" For the pagans run after all these things, and your heavenly Father knows that you need them." The difference between the one who seeks first the kingdom of God and his righteousness, and the one who does not, is that the former receives them from God ("all these things are given to" them), while the latter continues to have to run after them.

When we seek first the kingdom of God and his righteousness we can cease worrying about tomorrow, "for tomorrow will worry about itself. Each day has enough troubles of its own."

That's a far cry from what most of us are used to; a long way, too, from what we expect from God. But we can trust what Jesus says, and focus on God's kingdom and righteousness today, "and all these things will be added to you as well."

For a more complete understanding of what Jesus says about abundant life, read the Gospel of Matthew, chapters 5, 6, and 7, in the New Testament.