

May 7, 2017  
Fourth Sunday of Easter

**“Get a Life!”**  
by Mary Anne Biggs

Psalm 23 // 1 Peter 2:19-25 // John 10:1-10

As many of you know, I'm never standing in those long lines every time Apple comes out with a new product. I leave that to someone else in our family (who will remain nameless) and to whom I've been married for over four decades. I do get a different phone every so often because I'm the one who has to take his cast-offs when the newest phone is unveiled. I resent it just a little bit, mostly because he couches it in such a way that it seems like he's doing me a big favor. Just when I get Pat Tucker to show me how to take pictures and other cool stuff, I find myself having to learn it all over again, and I'm not a quick study. But I did learn that I can personalize the way the phone rings, depending on who is calling. When my friend Lynn from San Antonio calls me, it could play "The Eyes of Texas." When Nan calls from the office it could play the theme song from "Mission Impossible." I'm trying to figure out if I can get it to play Darth Vader's theme from Star Wars when John calls. But what's cool is, when my phone rings, I could know who is calling immediately because I could recognize the theme song I've assigned to that person.

Jesus said, "My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand" (John 10:27-28). I know I'm dating myself, but I think immediately of the old RCA trademark with the little dog standing next to the Victrola, his head cocked to one side, over the slogan, "His Master's Voice." Jesus imagines us listening and through all the noise and distraction ... through all the demanding calls and wrong numbers ... discerning his voice and following him. Like children who know the sound of their parents' call, we know his call and can be quick to respond. Like parents who know the cries of their own children, he knows us, and is quick to respond. And if we will listen ... if we will follow ... he will lead us into life.

The Bible has a variety of ways for describing what God does for us through Christ. "Salvation" is one word for it. "Atonement" is another. "Reconciliation," "redemption," "deliverance," "a new heaven and a new earth," ... all of these are different ways of describing the same thing. Each of the gospels has a different way of describing just what it is that Jesus came here to do. In *Matthew*, Jesus is the new Moses who brings a new revelation from God and calls everyone to join the new synagogue ... which he nicknames the *ecclesia* ... the "called out" ... the "called together" ... or, as it's usually translated ... the "church." For *Luke*, Jesus comes with a message of forgiveness for everyone who repents and trusts in God ... for men and women ... for prostitutes and Pharisees ... for tax-collectors and priests ... for Jews and Samaritans ... for rich and poor ... for eunuchs and Gentiles ... everybody. *Mark* sees Jesus as the Messiah who has come to suffer for us and lead his followers to glory if we are willing to suffer with him and carry our crosses for the sake of others. But of all of them, I like John's picture the best. In *John* the word for salvation ... the word that contains everything Jesus came to do and demonstrate and bestow and accomplish for us ... is the word "life." That's it. LIFE!

That's what Jesus offers us ... life! It's just as simple and as complicated as that. According to John, our recruiting poster should be "Follow Jesus and get a life." "Follow Jesus and get an eternal life." "Follow Jesus and get an abundant life." It's life in quantity ... life in quality ... life in full ... all life ... all the time. Jesus gives us life!

It's not just about getting life *after* death. It's about getting a life *before* death. I have known too many people ... I'm sure you've known some, too ... who settled for less than life ... whose lives were truncated by disappointments they couldn't accept ... or fears they couldn't overcome ... or traumas they couldn't release. They became bitter or paralyzed or mean in the sense of being small-souled. Victimized, they chose to remain victims long after the person who victimized them ever gave them a second thought ... and they would use up their friends rehashing the details. Passionate, they grew so attached to some single issue that their whole being was eclipsed by it until they were blinded to the extremes they had embraced, and they would wear out their friends talking about nothing else. Terrified, they became so enslaved to their constant paranoia that somebody was out to get them ... that somebody might take advantage of them ... that they drew in and held back and trusted no one ... and always assumed the worst ... and they scared away their friends with their warnings.

I know you are all too kind ever to say it out loud. You are all too compassionate to be so blunt. But maybe every once in a while you meet somebody, and after you listen to them rant for a little while ... and realize that what consumes them is so selfish, so trivial, so insignificant to any normal person ... you don't say it out loud ... but a voice starts screaming in your head, "Get over it! Get help! Get a life!" Am I the only one who ever has that feeling? And what I can't understand is, why are so many of these poor souls religious?

Rabbi Harold Kushner complains about this in Who Needs God? He notes: "*The issue is not what God is like. The issue is what kind of people we become when we attach ourselves to God.*" I couldn't agree more. The religions of the world have given us the great souls ... men and women who became larger than themselves ... who made a difference, and became an example to the rest of us of what one person can become. I'm talking about the usual suspects: Mother Teresa of Calcutta, Elie Wiesel, the Dalai Lama, Martin Luther King, and so on. Many more are not so well known. We can't know all of their names, because the great souls aren't about fame and making a name for themselves. They live here and they're among us. They exude love, joy, peace, patience, kindness, generosity, faithfulness, gentleness, and self-control, those very qualities Paul calls "the fruit of the Spirit." These are the people who live by the Spirit, with gratitude and humility. They seem to savor life ... to appreciate the wonder and diversity of God's creation. They are lifelong learners, who develop their capacity to enjoy music, art, and beauty in all its forms. Their faith does not make them self-righteous, or narrow the scope of their interests. They are especially aware of the persons around them. They are not critical and judgmental. They understand they are not made less by the beauty and success of someone beside themselves. Rather, they encourage and bless and celebrate the gifts they see in others. I hope you have had an opportunity to know one of these great souls in your lifetime ... and maybe to be mentored by them ... or live in the same household ... to be loved by a great soul who shines forth the loving presence of God. I have had that privilege, and they made me a better person just by associating with them.

But I have known so many other people, deeply religious but barely spiritual, who, as Kushner describes them, "*are always at services, always invoking the name of God in their conversations. And so often they turn out to be small-souled people ... insecure and judgmental*

... *quick to find fault with others.*” Have you ever met siblings from the same family who were so different in character and likeability, that you just couldn’t believe they grew up in the same house? Well, it’s like that with our extended faith family. You meet some of them ... you listen to their speech ... you catch the drift of their hate or arrogance or prejudice ... their lack of compassion or mercy ... the narrowness of their thinking and all the people they exclude from their approval, and you think, “How in the world did you grow up with the same Shepherd I did? I don’t recognize this God you’re talking about!” They read the same Bible. They observe the same rituals. They even use a lot of the same language we do. But somehow, it has made them altogether different people.

Ironically, Jesus’ strongest confrontations ... his most resistant listeners ... were the most passionately religious people of his day, members of his own faith family. It appears that they thought they had God all figured out and it gave them the jitters to think that God might be different from what they believed ... or that God would include people they would exclude ... or think anything other than what they thought. Their souls were shriveled ... not from protecting God ... God needs no protection from us ... but from protecting their self-serving beliefs about God. To use J.B. Phillips’ phrase, “their God was too small!” They grew mean-spirited from serving a mean little God.

They accused Jesus of being a drunk and a glutton. They accused Jesus of being a messenger of the Devil. They accused Jesus of being a troublemaker. They screamed that he be crucified. And do you know what Jesus said to people like them? He said, “Get a life!” Oh yes, they were the “they” Jesus meant when he said, “I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly.”

We all know some people like that, but what can we do? They are so stuck ... they can’t listen ... they can’t change ... they can’t even see what they’re missing ... let alone what they are doing to the people around them. But of course, it’s always dangerous to speak of “those people,” and make sweeping judgments around the labels and descriptions that our prejudices project on whole groups of people. We don’t want to do that! That’s what “those people” do! It’s too bad our truth in labeling laws don’t apply to the speech we use against each other. But this text isn’t about Jesus’ enemies or ours. It’s about Jesus’ own sheep. It’s about us. If we aren’t his followers, most of us here want to be ... most of us here try to be. “My sheep hear my voice. I know them, and they follow me. I give them eternal life, and they will never perish. No one will snatch them out of my hand.” We also are the “they” Jesus meant when he said “I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly.”

You see my point. So many people that I know feel spiritually undernourished, disenchanted with Christians, and dissatisfied with the church. They feast too much on the spiritual junk food of pop culture, and then wonder why they don’t get more from God. So look at your life as it is. Does your faith make you a better person? Are you living large? Would you characterize your life as rich and meaningful ... copious in the grace gifts of God’s diverse creation? Are you a gift to the people around you? Are you on your way to becoming one of those “great souls” we considered earlier? Or is your soul shrinking ... your concern narrowing ... your circle of care shriveling down pretty much to just you and maybe a few who are like you? Are you always listening for the voice of the Shepherd above all the voices of politics and fashion and power and entertainment so that you can follow ... not them ... but him? Are they going to lead you beside still waters or through the valley of the shadow of death? Are they going to give you life everlasting or form you into a great soul?

Somebody at *The Door* magazine with way too much time on their hands sent the familiar version of the twenty third psalm through several internet translation sites. They translated it from English to Japanese, then from Japanese to French, then from French back into English. This was the result:

*You shepherd is mine, me will not miss anything.  
You downward inserted me in the grassy grass;  
You find me the quiet swimming pools for drinking.  
Let me catch my breath before you send me in the right direction.  
When walking inside the valley of the shade where I am deep,  
I do not possess the fear of badness, for you is with me;  
Your bar and your personnel are there to calm me.  
From the front of the mine a hostile presence spreads before me like a board.  
You spilled oil on my head, my cup is overtaxed.  
Your beauty and love drive out after me each day of my life.  
As for me, I'll live certainly permanently in the house of the main thing.*

It lost a little in translation, didn't it? That's also what seems to happen sometimes when we translate scripture into our lives. We cut a bit here ... we lose something there ... and what comes out doesn't nearly resemble Jesus the way we thought it would. Jesus promises an eternal, abundant life to those who follow him, but we miss it because we aren't listening for his voice most of the time ... we aren't ready to turn away from the thieves who rob us of our best soul growth with lies and promises never kept. We see so many examples, even in our own faith family called "Christian" ... of what ... God help us! ... we *don't* ever want to become. But when we look at our own lives, maybe we don't see enough of a family resemblance there, either, and whose fault is that but our own? Because I think Jesus was serious when he invited us to get a life. And I think he showed us how. I think he is still with us ... among us ... and calling us by name ... calling us away from the things that strangle our joy and calling us into sharing more ... and giving more ... and loving more ... and living more than we ever dared before.

Bernard of Clairvaux said, "The glory of God is a human being fully alive." So listen up. Hear Jesus' voice calling you above all the rest. Then get a life. Go where he sends you. Let go of what is holding you back. Do what you've got to do, but follow him, the greatest of the great souls. Get a life. Get a life. Why would you settle for less?

May we pray?

Gentle Shepherd of our souls, you call us to life, but too often we accept less than life. We hold back, we hold on to the things that weigh us down. Help us not to be so hard of hearing, but to listen and to hear and to follow. Grow our souls and lead us into the life that you gave your life for us to have. This is our prayer by your holy name. Amen.