



Living Enthusiastically
By Bishop Linda Lee
Wisconsin Annual Conference
June 14-17, 2009

Scripture Lesson – John 10: 7-10

“I am the gate, whoever enters by me will be saved, and will come in and go out and find pasture. The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.”

Good evening and welcome to you all!

We are blessed by being led in this worship service by our Wisconsin Annual Conference youth – our dynamic – faithful – faith filled – gifted – enthusiastic youth!

As we continue to express our appreciation and support for our fine youth and their leadership, we acknowledge our regret that Tina Itson, who has played such an important role in their lives, is not at Annual Conference session with us this year. Let us remember her and others who are not able to be here in our thoughts and prayers. Let us pray.

I bring you greetings this evening from all of the people who serve you at the Conference Center and our Regional Offices. I also bring you greetings on behalf of all the United Methodist bishops around the world. I bring you greetings in the name of Lillie Williams Lee and Lewie Mitchell Lee who gave me life on earth.

Most of all, I bring you greetings in the name and for the sake of Jesus Christ – who sustains my life and your life – Jesus Christ, who lifts us up when we’re down – Jesus Christ, who sets us free from the things that bind us –
 Let the church say – AMEN!

During the last four years, lay and clergy representatives discerned a vision for the Wisconsin Annual Conference. Through conversations with each other and with people around the conference, the spirit of the people who are United Methodist’s in Wisconsin spoke – our vision is to be a people who live and who give and who love – beyond all expectation!! A lofty goal. A worthy endeavor. A cry from the heart. This vision is way bigger than anything we can accomplish by our own efforts alone.

During our strategic planning process, your conference leaders and representatives from as many of our constituencies as we could fit into the room talked, prayed, surveyed, discerned where to start.

It became clear that we need to begin with our spiritual life. To live beyond what’s ordinary – beyond what everybody does all the time. We have to live differently! We can live differently when we are in touch with our purpose for being here -- in touch with and passionate about God’s divine plan for our lives.

Jesus reveals our purpose in these words: We are here to have life – and to have it abundantly – WE – the human race – WE not me. Jesus came so that we can all have life – have a full life, a life that goes beyond the ordinary.

The people Jesus was speaking to – the people Jesus called sheep – were people who did NOT have abundance. In fact, most of them didn't have much of a life. The masses of people were struggling to survive – struggling every day to find work, struggling to get enough to eat, struggling with disease, struggling to live. They were like zombies – moving on the outside, but no life on the inside.

Jesus saw their condition and had great compassion for them. That was why He had come. The people were being exploited, manipulated, abused by the same leaders and priests who were supposed to protect them and show them the way to go. It wasn't happening – so Jesus came. He came offering the people things money couldn't buy, politics couldn't manipulate, and people couldn't kill.

Jesus brought a vision and a demonstration of the power of God. Blind Bartimaeus received new sight; nine lepers were made clean; the woman at the well was given a new chance for her life.

Jesus was the gate – his sheep – those who follow him – could go in and out of the sheepfold. They could go in and out of the safety of the direct presence – the private space and time with the shepherd -- and find pasture no matter where they were.

Paul wrote – that we live and move and have our being in Jesus Christ. The psalmist wrote that there is no place that we can go that God is not with us. Isaiah wrote that when we go through the fires of life we will not be burned. When we go through the sewer waters of life, they will not overcome us. This is what it means to have life and have it abundantly.

In today's world, there are people living in the same kind of conditions that the people of Jesus' day lived – human injustice and inhumanity toward other human beings has not yet ended. Poverty and war still need to be ended. Racism, sexism, homophobia, ageism, greed, hatred and arrogance continue to plague human relationships in society and in the church. We are struggling to break free. In Christ, we are no longer bound.

But we have a higher purpose than to struggle throughout our whole lives. We are here to LIVE. To be alive is evidenced by three things

- 1) to be in a state of growth
- 2) to be able to reproduce
- 3) to adapt to one's environment.

We are here to grow – to change – to be transformed by the ins and outs, and ups and downs of life. We are here to reproduce – to create new life, not to destroy or tear it down. We are here to adapt – to be flexible – to adjust to change. These are the marks of life.

Jesus came not only that we would have life – but that we would have it abundantly – overflowing. Overflowing and filled with things the world can't give us, and things the world can't take away.

Things like:

- ❖ Faith – the substance of things hoped for – the evidence of things not seen
- ❖ Endurance/resilience – the ability not to give up no matter what
- ❖ Courage to face our fears

As I look back on my life, I can see now how God has given me life. I grew up in the “hood” – West Philadelphia and Cleveland. Life was not always easy, it was sometimes dangerous – it definitely had the bitter with the sweet. God caused me to grow even when I resisted. God enabled me to produce and reproduce in the face of that which was intended to destroy. God helped me to adapt, to face racism, sexism, elitism.

W.E.B. Du Bois wrote – “Believe in life! Always, human beings will live and progress to greater and broader and fuller life.” Let us continue to believe in life and in one another, in the human race!

If you’re here today, Jesus has given you life. And if you’re here today, I believe you are willing – willing to grow, to produce, to reproduce and to adapt to whatever comes. Jesus is our gate – our gateway to living the truly abundant life of the spirit.

I invite us to focus in the 2009-10 year on growing – growing spiritually. When we are spiritually fit – when we seek God’s kingdom first – everything else we need will be given/found/added.

I invite us to focus on producing and reproducing – to be creative as we continue in mission and ministry for the sake of Jesus Christ in the world – no matter what happens with the economy – no matter what we decide about our constitutional amendments or the world-wide nature of the church – whatever we decide as a conference to do about our camps/budget/our structure. Let us remember that life reproduces itself. We can be imaginative, creative and daring in ways that allow us to continue to engage our communities and our world for Christ.

In the 2009-10 year, let us discuss how to adapt to the changes we have yet to see. There are predictions of what’s going to happen with the international economy – discussions of the U.S. relationship with the Muslim world – continuing wars and rumors of war with an unpredictable North Korea and a Middle East still in conflict. And, in some of our own communities – people are still reeling from plant closings, floods and other personal losses.

But Jesus came so that we could STILL have life. Life that comes from the kindness of one human being to another. Life that comes from sharing even when we don’t have much ourselves. Life that comes from faith – understanding that “what is seen was (is) made from things that are not visible.” Jesus came to give us the abundant life that comes from knowing our God in Christ Jesus, in whom we live and move and have our being.

There are times in my life that have been hard, times of struggle. Years ago, there were times I wondered if I would wake up the next morning, and if I did, if I’d want to face the day. But I have found that in Jesus there is life. There is truth.

In Jesus, there is peace – forgiveness – love. I have found that in Christ Jesus there is strength for today and HOPE for tomorrow.

Jesus invites us to come to Him. “Come to me all you who labor and are heavy laden and I will give you rest for your souls.”

This is abundant life – peace of mind – protection from harm – assurance of God’s love. Money can’t buy it – politics can’t manipulate it -- and people can’t kill it!

I don’t know about you, but I’m glad about it! Jesus came that we could have life and have it abundantly! I have an absorbing interest in following Jesus.

I have a lively desire to be more like Him. I am eager to be involved in kingdom building – absorbing interest, lively desire, eager involvement.

- ❖ ABSORBING INTEREST
- ❖ LIVELY DESIRE
- ❖ EAGER INVOLVEMENT

Do you know what it's called when we have these things? It's called enthusiasm!!! Let us live and serve God with absorbing interest, lively desire and eager involvement!

Lord, make us an instrument of thy peace;
Where there is hatred, let us sow love;
Where there is injury, pardon;
Where there is doubt, faith;
Where there is despair, hope;
Where there is darkness, light;
And where there is sadness, joy.

O Divine Master,
Grant that we may not so much seek
To be consoled as to console;
To be understood, as to understand;
To be loved, as to love;
For it is in giving that we receive;
It is in pardoning that we are pardoned,
And it is in dying that we are born to eternal life.

We've got a story to tell -- a message to deliver -- hope to give.

"I heard an old, old story, how a Savior came from glory, how He gave his life on Calvary to save a wretch like me. I heard about His groaning, of His precious blood's atoning, then I repented of my sins and won the victory.

"I heard about His healing, of His cleansing power revealing, how He made the lame to walk again and caused the blind to see; and then I cried, 'Dear Jesus, come and heal my broken spirit,' and somehow Jesus came and brought to me the victory.

"I heard about a mansion He has built for me in glory, and I heard about the streets of gold beyond the crystal sea; about the angels singing and the old redemption story, and some sweet day I'll sing up there the song of victory.

"O victory in Jesus, my Savior forever! He sought me and bought me with His redeeming blood; He loved me ere I knew Him, and all my love is due Him; He plunged me to victory beneath the cleansing flood."

Yes – Yes – Yes.

Let's live and let's live enthusiastically!