

Grace to you and peace from God our Father and the Lord Jesus Christ.

In today's second reading, Paul urges the rich to "take hold of the life that really is life." That is one of my go-to phrases from the Bible. I did a quick search of the sermon file on my computer and came up with 89 files. Now that's not 89 different sermons, because in recent years I create three different files for each sermon, the original that gets printed out and put in the folder in the narthex, a PDF that gets posted online, and this one here, that I print in larger print and arrange to make it easier to keep track of my place. But that's still at least 50 different sermons going back 15 years in which I quote the phrase "Life that really is life." I do so because I find it to be a key concept that addresses the misguided struggle of humankind to take control of the world away from God, a struggle that goes back to the third chapter of Genesis when we listened to a voice that told us to trust not God but ourselves. We think we know what is best for us, looking out for our own self-interest, maximizing wealth and comfort and minimizing suffering and deprivation. But that is actually leading us to disaster, and God is continually working to call us back to the life that we were created for, life that is good not only for us but for all people, and whole creation as well. Life that is real life, not fake or illusory.

I've gotten interested in the science of nutrition and health in the past year, and one of the things scientists are learning is that a certain amount of discomfort and even suffering, within limits, can be beneficial. We've learned, for instance, that plants are strengthened by being pelted by wind and rain. Of course too much of either will also kill them. But too little will mean they don't grow properly. There are some plants, apparently, that if you grow them in a greenhouse without blowing fans on them, will soon be unable to support their own weight. We've also learned that plants that are bitten by insects produce chemicals that help not only the plant, but also us when we eat them, so that, ironically, plants treated with pesticides so that they are never exposed to the bites of insects are actually less nutritious than plants that are. Go figure! And a certain amount stress is not only good for plants, but for animals too, including us human animals. I think most people know that making our hearts pump faster by exercising not only strengthens the heart, but also increases circulation, improves the immune system, and has other benefits. But did you know that taking cold showers, or a dip in a cold lake, causes stress in the body that improves circulation, metabolism, and the immune system, and even produces endorphins that fight depression? Most interesting to me in my exploration of nutrition science, though, has been the recent awareness of the benefits of fasting, of regularly going without food for 12, 18, or 24 hours, and for the more advanced practitioners, sometimes for several days in a row. Being deprived of food for limited periods of time causes the body to get serious about repairing damaged cells and removing waste, and even fighting cancer, things it doesn't have a chance to do when we are continually forcing our digestive system to be active. Fasting also makes us use the fat our bodies store up for times of scarcity, something that never happens when all we ever experience is abundance. All of this science reinforces the idea found all over the Bible that the lifestyle we would prefer to live, if it were up to us, the lifestyle we in fact *tend* to choose because we often *do* have the choice, is not a lifestyle that actually leads to life.

Our Gospel reading today from Luke is a clear illustration of this. It continues the theme, going back to Luke's first chapter, of the reversal of fortunes, of God "bringing down the powerful and lifting up the lowly." (Luke 1:52) The rich man who is self-sufficient in his life of abundant excess, "feasting sumptuously every day," richly dressed and housed, shows no

concern for the poor man lying outside his gate dying of hunger and disease, with the neighborhood dogs licking his sores. To the dog lovers among us this latter detail might sound vaguely comforting. To a first-century audience it would have been horrifying. Dogs for them were not the cuddly pets that fill our social media feeds. Dogs devoured dead bodies that were left unburied. These dogs were having an appetizer in anticipation of their own feast. The contrast between the two men could not be more stark. Interestingly, we don't know the name of the rich man in this parable, but we do know the name of the poor man. Lazarus. It's the shortened form of the name Eleazar, which means "God has helped." The twist in this story is that the rich man's self-indulgent lifestyle, the kind of lifestyle that we lean towards, as I said earlier, is not life that really is life.

The same can be said for the first reading, which again calls out the rich who neglect the poor. I'll just note three quick things about that reading. First, all of those things, with only a little bit of translation from ancient to modern realities, look like things I like to do – you know, couch lounging, wine drinking, even improvisation on my musical instrument. (That's what I call it when I hit a wrong note.) I expect that you also resonate with that list. Second, you and I are the rich. Even though I'm sure most of us do not consider ourselves rich, by global standards, we are. Third, I have learned from biblical scholars that God in the Old Testament does not so much punish sinners as "visit their iniquities upon them," to use the quaint language of King James. In other words, God allows us to suffer the consequences of the lifestyle choices we make.

Today after the service we will have our fall festival, which this year we are calling "Shine!" This is a reference to Jesus in his sermon on the mount urging his followers to "let your light shine before others that they may see your good works and glorify your Father in heaven." You could say that that is a pretty good description of what the Christian life looks like, the life that starts by trusting that the life that we are reborn into in holy baptism is life that really is life, life that is not self-serving and self-indulgent, but reaches out to care for others, especially those who are most in need. And that's why we include that verse in our baptismal service when we present the baptismal candle. This is the life that Paul in Jesus' name calls the rich to in our second reading, a life that does not trust in the uncertainty of riches, but that uses riches in the service of God and neighbor. The promise of this life allows us to confront with honesty the ways that we are selfish and self-indulgent, how our trust is often not in God, but in power, wealth, and status, and opens to us the possibility of repentance, of changing our attitudes and behaviors. This change is possible because, as we will sing in just a moment, "Christ the Lord has entered our human story" to forgive our sin and to reorient us toward real life. The kinds of things that we will focus on today in our festival point us in that same direction: toward helping those in need, the homeless and the hungry, toward God's story of "Manna and Mercy," the story of the Bible that God invites and draws us into, and that we will busy ourselves with remembering and reflecting on in the coming months. This is the life of the church. It is counter-intuitive. By the standards of the world it seems unattractive and a little weird. But we have the promise that being turned upside down and inside out by the work of the Holy Spirit is actually good for us, and for the world that God loves so deeply in Jesus Christ.

So let's rise, shine, and live out of that promise of our baptism. And the peace of God, which passes all understanding, will keep our hearts and minds in Christ Jesus. Amen.