

“I have come so that you all might have life, and life in all its fullness...”

What does this mean? What does Jesus have to do with fullness of life, joy in life, maybe “happiness” in this lifetime, living out the life for which we were created to the fullness of our God-given potential?

Oh, I don’t mean churchy stuff, that everybody has to get involved in a church, become all holy, join a small group and give them all your money and all that. I mean for everybody, and for real—your friends and neighbors and people in downtown Los Angeles and Mexico and Africa and all the world: what is the key to how people are going to be fully happy, live life to the full?

Let me read you an article from the Associated Press [Dec 14, 2004] entitled “Wife Regrets Husband’s \$314 Million Lottery Windfall:”

The wife of the lottery winner who took home the richest undivided jackpot in US history says she regrets his purchase of the \$314 million ticket... “I wish all of this never would have happened,” Jewel Whittaker told the Charleston Gazette... “I wish I would have torn the ticket up.”

Since winning the lottery two years ago, her husband Jack Whittaker has been arrested twice for drunk driving, and ordered into rehab. He also faces charges he attacked a bar manager, and is accused in two different lawsuits of making trouble at a nightclub and a racetrack. [No way to know how Jack was spending his time, what sort of citizen he was, before all the good fortune came his way.]

There have been several thefts involving Whittaker’s vehicle, his office, and his house in Scott Depot, W VA. One of the thefts occurred in his home in September on the same day as an 18-yr-old friend of Whittaker’s granddaughter was found dead there. The death remains under investigation.

Last week Whittaker, 57, reported his granddaughter missing. Putnam Co. sheriff’s Sgt Lisa Arthur said the granddaughter is not considered a kidnapping victim.”

Whittaker took his winnings in a lump sum of \$113 million after taxes.”

I know what you’re probably thinking: “What an idiot! How could he be so stupid? Jack, Jack, Jack...Maybe have a party, entertain your friends, buy a new car, but then settle down...But Jack...don’t let it all slip away, turn to ashes...How stupid to squander such an amazing windfall.”

We may be thinking Jack Whittaker is particularly stupid, but statistically he is fairly typical: winners of big financial lottery prizes tend to end up worse off than they were before—as if having a lot of money simply gives them more resources, a bigger shovel, to dig the hole they sink inevitably down into.

Whether or not you are surprised by Mr Whittaker’s rapid, self-financed decline into personal chaos, his story provides a stark metaphor for how a lot of people view happiness in this lifetime: if I had more money, I’d have it made. If I had better health, I’d be happy. If I had an exciting life, with more amusement, I’d be happy. Kids think, if only I could get to Disneyland more often, I’d be happy. If only I could get a nice

boyfriend, get into a good college, I'd be happy. If only I had more energy, if only; if only...it's a long list, isn't it?

Sociologists now have a new scientific sounding name for what used to be as simple as "keeping up with the Joneses"; it's called "reference anxiety." What happens is that Americans "tend not to ask themselves 'does my house meet my needs?' Instead they ask, 'is my house nicer than my neighbors?'" As people struggle up the economic ladder, "most almost immediately stop feeling grateful for their elevated circumstances and focus on what they still don't have." If you grew up in a 2-bedroom home and longed for a 3-bedroom home, if people around you have four, you quickly begin to long for a new 4-bedroom home." Even the *Time* magazine article [p A 34, Jan 17, 2005] concluded, "Everyone needs a certain amount of money, but chasing money rather than meaning is a formula for discontent. Too many Americans have made materialism their principal goal. Then they wonder why they don't feel happy."

Along comes Jesus into our American psyche, our American dreams, our human nature; Jesus comes into this human wishing and comparing and musing and working and planning and saving and spending. Jesus says, "I have come so that you might enjoy life in all its fullness."

To oversimplify, all the Jack Whittakers, all the people like us, start out thinking fullness of life will come when we get more of, or at least learn to manage, what's "out there." Jesus tells us to refocus: fullness of life always has to do with what's going on "in here." "The Kingdom of God is within you..." Good thing, in a way: for all our jogging and working out, eating our vitamins; for all our financial planning and flood insurance, we ultimately have little control over what's happening "out there." Stuff happens.

(This view of how "fullness of life" is defined, attained, also drives public policy, drives the mission effort of churches and denominations. Enlightened and broad-minded people who assume that fullness of life comes from "out there" will naturally want to emphasize changing circumstances, changing external factors in order to approach toward the Kingdom of God, world peace, fullness of life. One of the primary roles of Government is to provide its citizens basic security, to provide a level playing field for all the children so that all grow up with the freedom we cherish to be able to make the choices which will affect their lives. We should support such Government. But Christ's Church understands fullness of life differently; we can do better than perpetuating the life of Jack Whittaker, on a smaller scale, in the lives of millions of people. Changing things "out there" will not automatically change what goes on "in here" in the lives of our citizens, our families, our neighborhood, our nation—and the treasure Christ's Church has to offer is not identical but complementary to what the State is responsible to provide. The State cannot offer anyone the opportunity to genuine fullness of life in relationship to Jesus or His Spirit or His Church: that's where we come in!)

Jesus knows we do have some control over what's happening "in here." If we will trust in God, obeying His Spirit as Jesus did, then we end up with genuine control over what's happening "in here," as most of you are experiencing. (Changed hearts, spirits, attitudes, lead to changed lives, changed cities, changed societies; a changed world.)

Everyone wants to "be happy," to live life to the full. Atheist, Muslim, agnostic, Buddhist, Christian, Jew. We all share this common desire. No one wants to be unhappy, unfulfilled. But how successful we are in living this life to the full will first

depend upon how we define “life to the full.” How we define the question helps determine how we live out the answer.

Our natural human condition tends to define happiness as having our needs met, managing our environment and the choices in our lives, enjoying safety and security and purpose for ourselves and our loved ones. It’s natural to think of God as the Big Sugar Daddy, who offers us what we need and think we want. Security, money, choices, health, travel, thrills, love. The Divine Vending Machine, as someone quipped. If God does His job well, provides what we want, we’re happy.

Jesus, however, keeps encouraging us to understand and pursue our highest well-being in a totally different way. “I have come so that you might enjoy life in all its fullness.” He did *not* come to teach us about God as the divine Sugar Daddy, eager to meet our every whim. Eager to meet our needs and wants, willing to turn us all into Jack Whitakers, [sorry, Jack, to be picking on you—nothing personal—but by the grace of God, we could be you] armed with even more money to pave our descent into a living hell even faster for ourselves and those around us. What good is a better “outside” environment if we’re still all messed up on the “inside?” There is no environment we can not contaminate.

“In this world you will face trial and tribulation; but be of good cheer, for I have overcome the world...” [John 16] “So whoever hears these words of Mine and acts on them is like the one who built his house, her house, upon solid rock...the rains came down, the floods rose, the hurricane came and blew upon that house, but the house did not fall because its foundations were upon solid rock.” [Mt 7:24ff]

What’s this? Jesus shows no interest in beaming us up out of the dangers and circumstances of this world; in fact He hints that we’ll get dangers, hurricanes, floods if we remain faithful in it. Not only that; He promises a blessing to you who endure insults and persecution for His sake. [Mt 5:11-12] (Not exactly the natural path to self-fulfillment; not what our neighbors, or probably any of us, had in mind when we started the spiritual journey.)

But Jesus is the wisest person who ever lived. What’s the method behind His madness? For one thing, Jesus is not much interested in “happiness” the way the world defines it. Jesus understands that our purpose on earth is not to grow rich and comfortable but to keep growing in spirit, in character. God’s design is not to provide for our every want, to meet our every need on our terms—but for us to keep growing into people who become people fulfilled in Him. God is committed to changing us “in here.” This is the project which will occupy us, keep us interested and thriving, throughout all eternity. What good is God if He were to indulge all our desires, leaving us unchanged, only for us to remain frustrated throughout all eternity? As long as our hopes and desires and longings are focused on anything less than pleasing and loving God, we will only be frustrated and disappointed—Jack Whitakers waiting to happen. It could not be otherwise: as long as the things we think we want will only land us farther and farther away from God, in communion with whom we are in heaven, then to get exactly what we wanted can only land us in hell.

(A man named John Balderson wrote a play in which a man died and passed into the next world. When he opened his eyes, he saw laid out before him every luxury he had ever dreamed of, plus a lot of new ones. He found himself in that state of being in which his every wish was immediately granted. At the slightest whim, an attendant

would appear to see that it was promptly fulfilled. After a while, the man grew bored, then restless. “If only something different would happen,” he thought to himself. “If only there would be a refusal once in a while.” Finally the monotony became unbearable, and he summoned the attendant, saying “I want something I can’t have unless I work for it, unless there is a price.” “Sorry,” responded the attendant, “That’s the one wish we can’t grant here.” “Very well, the man said, “Then let me out of here. I’d rather be in hell.” Whereupon the attendant responded said, “But where did you think you are, sir?”)

This reality of things is not God being cruel, God paying us back, God wanting us to be miserable in this life and the next. You all know: God has sent the Son, Jesus, in order precisely to save us from ourselves; to show us how futile are our own natural inclinations and desires when we follow them in the place of the living God. Jesus Christ the Son has come to turn us around, to show us a better Way. God the Holy Spirit is with us every one, this moment and every moment, to bug us and to cajole and wheedle and flatter and beg and remind and to try to get our attention in any way we will allow. The Spirit keeps trying to guide us away from the usual counterfeit shortcuts promising to lead us into our personal “happiness.” (If we mistake them for God, they can only leave us disappointed, broken.) If we resist the Holy Spirit hard enough and long enough, our appetites and our pride will seduce us right into hell—the name for the condition wherein we prefer other things to communion with God, obedience to God, worshiping God.

We know the truth of all this. Think of the battles we fight. Start with what we put into our mouths. For many adults, a little alcohol is a good and pleasant thing: “a little wine maketh the heart grow merry,” according to the Psalmist. [104:15] But too often, then a little isn’t so satisfying, and it takes more and more to get the same buzz, and we have a big problem. A cute figure on a young woman is a nice thing—but when it becomes all-defining and leads her into anorexia or bulimia, it’s a big problem.

What about what comes out of our mouths? Our words can bless and build up and bring us close to others—or we can use them to tear down others, to sow discontent and mistrust. To work hard to provide for our families is a good thing—until we use work as an escape to avoid dealing with challenges at home and family; until we try to fill the holy hunger within us meant for God with our compulsive need to possess more and more and more. Or men and pornography: what starts out as an occasional illicit pleasure too often becomes an obsession, poisoning literally millions of marriages. What start out as pleasures, apart from the restraining influence of the Spirit of God, soon enough spin out of control and lead us into self-destruction. Collateral destruction of those who love us, too. Following our own appetites, by our own power, we wind up in the hell of our own choosing.

Jesus, of course, knows all this. He shows us, invites us into, a far better Way. *All of us*, whether we’re here worshiping this morning or not. There’s no Christian human nature and Buddhist human nature and atheist human nature. There’s no American human nature and Iraqi and Canadian human nature. [I love the fact that Jesus, the One through whom the universe and every molecule and every one of us persons has been created, respects every one of us human beings to allow each of us to decide what we do with Him, and when. (Of course this doesn’t mean He doesn’t care about the decision—of every one of the children of God—He loves us; He went to the cross to show us how greatly He loves us. But His love for us includes giving us space to make

decisions which will land us, by His grace, in heaven—or which will lead us first into the hell we insist on choosing.]

The good news is that Jesus' love, Jesus' Way, is offered to every single human being, and He is waiting to set free every life, every person to live the abundant life in Him. (Sometimes I wonder if some of our friends don't think, if they think anything at all about Jesus, something like, "Fullness of life" for Christians must mean something like "they have to go to church and get religious and give up all the fun stuff—everything I do not want to do." As if there were a great divide between our church life and our human life; as if Jesus is good only for redeeming the "church" segment of our lives while we remain addicted, out of control, workaholic, self-defeating in other elements of our lives.)

No! Jesus leads us into fullness of life not just in our "church" life but in the entirety of lives—every aspect within us. Jesus doesn't buy into the compartmentalizing so common in our day and time. You who have been entrusting your lives to His Spirit each day already know this. When we give over management of our lives to Jesus, He doesn't want only to make us into churchgoers, nor into closet Jack Whitakers. He longs to make us into a new creation; the person we were created by God to become.

There is no shortcut; there is no easy way to grow and mature as a human being. You were created, I was created, for a high and perfect eternal destiny. We were created to become conformed to the fullness of the stature of Christ. Any lessons we resist or fail now will only have to be repeated, with makeup work added, later on. Every lesson from God we learn, every element of our understanding, our will, our habit, our outlook, our capacity to love—everything we hand over to God and allow Him to transform, is one step closer to the Goal, the heavenly prize. (The process of "sanctification," technically.)

Jesus is interested not so much in changing "the outside" as changing us on the inside. There is no meaningful life, no growth possible if all the variables could be controlled, to prevent surprise and upset and divorce and addiction and wind and storm and illness and even death. Our natural choice is to do away with what we perceive as the negatives "out there." His is to prepare us and change us until we are abiding in Him, in His peace, in His purpose—immovable, unafraid, regardless of what life brings us from "out there." Until we know and trust and live knowing deeply that "all things work together for good for those who love God and are called according to His purpose."

[Romans 8:28]

See how Jesus lived. At no time did He choose the way of security or ease or salvation thru taming His circumstances. He did not use His power to quiet the mobs or the storms, for His own convenience. (Yes, I assume He met His financial responsibilities and supported His family for most of His life. But His constant question was "Father, what would You have me do? Thy will be done.")

His fierce obedience led Him into, not out of, "hot water." He kept healing on the Sabbath for a reason: to provoke and confront and challenge the attitudes which taught that God was more interested in rules than in the well-being of His people. God desires fullness of life for His people—not merely that we should become frightened followers of a lot of rules. Not that we should substitute familiarity with the Law for relationship with the living God.

Jesus couldn't stand it that people thought God was far away and disinterested—and mean. He taught His followers to call His Father "Abba," Daddy, and to trust that as

long as He was with them, they were going to be just fine: whether at worship in synagogue, or in the storm on the Sea of Galilee, or when the market “gives back” 20% and you were way overleveraged, or when you find yourself in the ICU at Hoag Hospital.

Most of us have little trouble believing Jesus was good at living the abundant life, trusting in God the Father even to the cross. The question is how fully you and I are going to trust and live in the promise of Jesus for each of us—to follow Him in the fullness of life even should it lead us to our cross.

It’s not always so easy to choose to trust what’s “in here” over to God. It’s not easy to trust in Jesus over choosing secretly to wish for the \$314 million. But it’s worth it.

John 10:7-13

So again Jesus said to them, "Very truly, I tell you, I am the gate for the sheep. All who came before me are thieves and bandits; but the sheep did not listen to them. 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.

"I am the good shepherd. The good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep. The hired hand, who is not the shepherd and does not own the sheep, sees the wolf coming and leaves the sheep and runs away--and the wolf snatches them and scatters them. The hired hand runs away because a hired hand does not care for the sheep.