

What is life? How shall we define what life is? Rather, how shall we define what life should be? I think the latter question is more realistic, for people do not usually go with the academic definition of anything, but something practical that actually works for them. Not everyone can define what life is; but every one has an idea or two about what life should be.

Recently, I heard that there was a controversy that dragged the Vatican into it. It was about a 38-year old Italian woman who was in coma for 17 years, since her automobile accident. She died, as the lawmakers rushed to pass a law designed to keep her alive. That rang the bell for the similar event 4 years ago, involving 41-year old Terri Schiavo, when our own lawmakers fell upon one another, trying to pass a law to keep the woman alive. There was never such a time, our lawmakers looked so humanitarian and compassionate.

How is life defined in the current dialogues? Who has the authority to define what life is? As we observe the current trend, life seems to be defined by politicians, lawmakers, and the religious organizations.

How do you feel about that? Is what the lawmakers define and pass as the law something that you are willing to accept as life? Or, is life far more than the legislation reached by votes from the lawmakers? Politicians and lawyers define what life is, and they want you to fit your life to that definition. Do you feel that it is fitting that elected representatives passed the law that defined what life is? Is life sufficient for a person, when that life is defined by others?

Did Jesus ever define what life is, and try to tell others to adhere to that definition? We must remember: such an issue never occurred to Jesus. While the issue for those self-appointed experts on life was to define what life *should be* for the rest of the population, the issue for Jesus

was what life *could mean* for each one. Jesus not only gave life to individuals, but also restored the *meaning* of life to the individuals.

Psalm 84:10 tells us about the difference between the quality and quantity, and between the meaningfulness and meaninglessness, of life:

For a day in thy courts is better than a thousand elsewhere.

The Psalmist expresses his yearning of a certain quality of life, rather than the quantity, by saying one day in God's courts is better than a thousand elsewhere. It becomes clear what kind of quality that the Psalmist was seeking, as we read on:

I had rather be a doorkeeper in the house of my God, than to dwell in the tents of wickedness.

It is clearly the meaningfulness of righteousness that the writer yearns. It is the meaningfulness

of godly living, and all the associated qualities of life that godly living embraces.

What people are looking for is not mere survival. People do not look forward to hand-to-mouth subsistence as the goal of their lives. People dream about how they would spend their lives, what kind of fruit to enjoy in their later days, about how enjoyable each living moment would be, and about what kind of legacy they would leave behind for the posterity.

Sadly, when there is a great debate of what life is, or what life should be, the dimension of the debate is limited to the question of whether the life support should be administered to a coma patient by the court order or by the freshly enacted law whose ink has barely dried. And often the religious organizations try to wedge into that foray, and leave their calling cards somewhere.

What would Jesus do about this question of life? How would

Jesus define life? What is the question that Jesus would raise for *your* life? After all, Jesus made clear why he came in John 10:10:

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.

We may not know what an abundant life looks like, but I am certain that every single one of us would know when our life is not abundant. Jesus came, so that we may have life, and have it abundantly. That was God's calling for Jesus, and that is God's will for each and every one of us today.

So, I conclude that, if there is anything in our lives that works to negate that abundance, anything that destroys that abundance of life, it is counter to God's will. Whatever that denies the abundance of life raises the red flag on God's computer screen.

One day Jesus met someone whose life was not abundant. In fact, his life was non-existent. In

fact, every living moment of his life was a torture. He was a leper. Before we go into it, we need to understand some social background regarding the treatment of the lepers. The Old Testaments put in the category of leprosy a wide variety of skin diseases. So, we are not certain, if the leper in the story was a genuine leper, or someone with other chronic skin conditions, who was swept into the category of leper, and kicked out of the human civilization.

By law, lepers were deemed unclean, and prohibited from coming in contact with the civilization. Even when they were healed, they had to go to the priest, and be certified that they are clean. In other words, the authority of law had to provide the certification beyond all recognition that the said unclean one is now free of the communicable disease.

That was the only way the former unclean one could rejoin the human activities. That is why Jesus told the man to show

himself to the priest. Jesus was concerned with the restoration of the man's position in the human society. It was not just healing of the illness that mattered, but the restoration of the quality and meaningfulness of life that also mattered.

But let us consider an alternative scenario. What if the leper died of the leprosy while he was pleading to Jesus? And what if Jesus, moved by pity brought the leper back to life—only he would still be a leper. What difference, then, did Jesus make in the leper's life? Would Jesus stop at bringing him back to life, but not care about his leprosy? Was the leper better off dead, or was the leper better off to be alive again, and should be thankful, and go back to the life of being a leper?

If you can see the absurdity of this scenario, then you would also see the absurdity of those lawmakers trying to enact the law designed to keep the coma patient on life support. That is not what we would define as an abundant life. That surely is not

the way Jesus would be satisfied with life. Jesus is obsessed with abundant life, and with our having it abundantly.

I read from a newspaper that there is this bonded servitude, called, kamlari system, in Nepal. A woman from Sausalito, Olga Murray, accidentally came to know about the fate of these kamlaris, because she broke a leg while touring Nepal. That gave her the opportunity to see the orphans, street kids, and disabled children. And eventually learn about the kamlari system.

The destitute sharecroppers sell their daughters, as young as 6, to upper class families. The sharecroppers collect debt, as they go on, and they are forced to sell their daughters for the price of about 1/3 of their annual income, which turns out to be about \$75. For us, one trip to a grocery store could easily cost more than that.

The famers are in a dilemma. They can keep their daughters, and watch them starve. Or, they

can sell them to a family in the larger city, and hope they will eat and be clothed better than they would be at home. And their daughter may even go to school, as the buyers promised. And with the sacrifice of one daughter, the whole family is able to eat for a few more months.

Thousands of girls were redeemed by Murray's efforts. If life is defined as the ability to breathe and excrete, as the lawmakers and others seem to believe, then these kamlari girls are living good lives. As one agent who was looking to buy contracts from the villagers said, they are doing well:

"Girls from here, when they go to the city, they get luxuries like TV and better dresses and good food. When they come home for Maghe [a major Hindu holiday], they say they like their freedom, but after 10 days or so, they start missing that city life."

Indeed, that sounds far more abundant than being a vegetable on a hospital bed, connected to expensive machines, doesn't it?

I wonder, is that life abundant enough for the girls? Does any one wonder why Murray could not accept such a definition of life as sufficient for these daughters of the destitute sharecroppers?

There is another example of such a view on the good life. The reporters bombarded the new president and CEO of NAACP, Benjamin Todd Jealous, with the question, whether the organization was necessary, now we have a black man in the White House.

If one is willing only to see that Harvard-educated black man living in the White House, then the question has the merit. But if one is willing to see the cold cement platform of the BART station in Oakland on the New Year's day, we will see a young black man, a supermarket employee, lying face down with his hands behind, getting shot in the back by a policeman. When a black man's life is that cheap, it is hard to pretend that racism is eradicated.

If one would look into certain local banks, then one might see that blacks and Hispanics getting higher interest rates on subprime loans than whites. If one would look into the legal system, then one might see the disparity in sentencing for African Americans. If one would look into African American communities, then one might find that the educational opportunities lacking, compared to other race communities. Jesus is still coming, because life is not abundant, when certain people are excluded. Yes, Jesus will come again.

What about abortion? Do those who clamor for the life of the unborn also clamor for the life of those who are born? If we force anyone to give birth to a child, then we should also share the responsibility of supporting and nurturing the child with the equitable amount of resources, education, and health care, until the child reaches a certain age. If life within the womb is precious, then life outside the womb is

equally precious, and it matters a whole lot more to a lot of people. You cannot just advocate for the unborn, only to abandon the child after he or she is born.

It all comes down to how we define what life is. Politicians and players enact into law by defining as life the ability to breathe and excrete by keeping a person on life support. The religious people seem to go along with it. Would Jesus go along with it, and say, "Yup, that is exactly what I meant by 'abundantly'"?

There is time to live and there is time to die. There is a quick death and there is a lingering death. The lingering death does not necessarily preserve the sanctity of life. Even the hunters try to avoid inflicting it on the game. Even the convict on the death row is protected from it. The lingering death rather tends to reduce a human being to a vegetable, stripping the identity and dignity from the person. It is hypocrisy to legislate a lingering

death and call it the preservation of the sanctity of life.

What matters to life is indicated by the portion of life the person lives after the healing encounter with Jesus. Life presupposes the restoration of a person's dignity and respect. Life presupposes the restoration of a person's location—the identity—within the human society. It is essential that we are aware that we are worthy to some one. That is the foundation of our identity. Make some one believe that he or she is worthless, and I can guarantee that that person will become destructive.

Jesus gave the leper the restoration that he was now worthy to some one, that he was wanted and needed by the society, independently certified by the highest authority of the land—the law, so that all could see and recognize. Life is not life, if there is no meaning, no quality, no achievement, or no enjoyment. For these things make up the abundance of life.

Jesus cares about the quality of life. Jesus not only heals, but restores meaningfulness to the life of a person. The abundance of life was the purpose for which he came—the abundance of life for you and me. It is not just healing of the body, but the quality of life in the sound body, and the rightful place in the human society that Jesus restored to the former leper that matter to life.

May Jesus also restore your lives.