

## **Abundant Life**

Central Lutheran Church – Dallas, Texas

Psalm 23 / Acts 2:42-47 / 1 Peter 2:19-25 / John 10:1-10

April 30, 2023

Let us pray . . . God of Many Names on this day we call you Good Shepherd trusting that you are leading, guiding, and providing for us as only you can. Take and use my words to empower our imaginations, awaken us to new possibilities, and embolden us in our actions. Amen.

As a guest preacher there are things that one should never do and other things one should always do. When invited, the first thing to do is to check your calendar and the second should be to check the lectionary readings.

I'll confess that when invited to join you today I only completed the first. My calendar was clear. I didn't look at the Scripture lessons until much later. And, here is what I found:

- Psalm 23. The best-known Psalm and one of few passages of Scripture many people can recite from memory. Wonderful!
- John 10:1-10. More imagery of sheep and shepherds. Jesus as the gate. Fantastic!
- 1 Peter 2:19-25. Talk about suffering and hardship. Uh oh.
- Acts 2:42-47. People doing church by coming together and sharing all of their possessions?

What have I agreed to? Is it too late to cancel?

Let's get the radical stuff out of the way first.

The Acts' passage comes at the end of the second chapter – a chapter that starts with Pentecost. The early church was on fire. It was laser focused on living out the Good News. The church was behaving in ways that are hard to imagine.

Over the next 2,000 years many would try this radical form of living out their faith, but few would persevere.

The Acts passage begins with followers of the Way of Jesus committing themselves to the apostles' teaching and to "koinonia," which is a Greek word often translated as fellowship or joint participation.<sup>1</sup>

80 years ago two couples set out on a mission to live out this passage in Georgia. They called their shared living venture Koinonia Farm.

The founders invited others to join them in what they called "a demonstration plot for the kingdom of God." It became a place for people to come together and to share all of themselves and all of their resources on a working farm. Koinonia broke down barriers, including class and race.

Today, Koinonia's impact continues

- through a mail order business from the farm,
- through founder Clarence Jordan's *Cotton Patch Gospel*,<sup>2</sup> and
- through ministries that were birthed at Koinonia, including Habitat for Humanity.<sup>3</sup>

So perhaps, for a select few, this communal lifestyle is achievable. But, what about the rest of us?

I'd like to suggest the final verse from today's Gospel reading offers an interpretive key that unites all 4 passages: Jesus came so that those who follow in his Way may experience abundant life.

Abundant life . . . Abundant life is an attractive concept.

The abundant life has been packaged and sold to us in more ways than we can count. In the parlance of late-stage capitalism, the abundant life is a life of excess – one filled with lots of money used to purchase exclusive goods and services for one's own consumption.

Abundant life also gets a bad rap from some Christians. Prosperity theology wrongly suggests that God is focused on financial prosperity and that God will bless God's faithful with larger and larger bank accounts. The so-called prosperity Gospel is a false Gospel.

Abundant life, as I've come to understand it, is something different from these financially limited perspectives.

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<sup>1</sup> Koinonia. [www.bibletools.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/Lexicon.show/ID/G2842/koinonia.htm](http://www.bibletools.org/index.cfm/fuseaction/Lexicon.show/ID/G2842/koinonia.htm)

<sup>2</sup> In the *Cotton Patch Gospel*, Jordan's updates the stories of Jesus and the letters of the New Testament using the language and culture of the mid-twentieth-century South

<sup>3</sup> Koinonia Farm -Brief History. [www.koinoniafarm.org/brief-history/](http://www.koinoniafarm.org/brief-history/)

- Abundant life is comprehensive and overarching.
- Abundant life is about fully embracing all that we are and all that we have in service of God.
- And, to borrow language from the Beatitudes,<sup>4</sup> the abundant life is a blessed life or a life of deep and abiding happiness.

The abundant life God intends for us includes the reassuring promises and difficult truths found in all of this morning's readings.

. . . The other common thread this morning shows up everywhere – it even made the cover of the bulletin: sheep.

Sheep and shepherds are everywhere!

Back in the 1980s a member of this congregation said yes to the invitation to attend a retreat. She and her husband were normal people leading busy lives and striving to live out their faith.

During the retreat Donagene Christian heard the speaker open the Scriptures before her in a way that changed her life and the life of the East Dallas community.

When she heard a familiar passage – yes, another one with sheep! – she knew she had to respond. The passage comes is from later in John's Gospel; it's the story of Jesus challenging Peter to "feed my sheep."<sup>5</sup>

Within 6 months of the retreat, Donagene convinced her church – this church – Central Lutheran – and a dozen others to come together to start a "feed my sheep" ministry called White Rock Center of Hope.

The ministry that started as a feeding ministry, literally feeding hungry people here in East Dallas.

Today, White Rock Center of Hope is supported by more than 40 communities of faith and is powered by more than 450 volunteers.

- The ministry of sheep feeding grew from serving residents of one zip code to two and then from two to five.
- It grew from feeding people to feeding and clothing and then to feeding and clothing and housing.
- And in this past year it has grown again from meeting basic needs to also providing personalized empowerment.

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<sup>4</sup> Beatitudes. See Matthew 5:3-12 and Luke 6:20-22.

<sup>5</sup> John 21:15-17.

At White Rock Center of Hope we have an ambitious vision statement: an East Dallas where all thrive.<sup>6</sup> Clarence Jordan might just consider our work to be a “demonstration plot for the kingdom of God.”

We strive to connect increasing numbers of people to the abundant life – a life marked by rich relationships, filled with meaning, and blessed in the good times and the difficult ones.

We remind ourselves often that the thriving life – the abundant life – the life God intends for all – is a life marked by generosity and the lived experience of knowing we are all in this together.

Clarence passed away in 1969;  
Koinonia Farm lives on.  
Habitat for Humanity lives on.

Donagene passed away in 1998;  
White Rock Center of Hope lives on.  
Donagene’s memory lives on in the organization’s volunteer of the year award named in her honor, which was awarded a few weeks ago to Central’s own Charlotte Danielson.

Abundance. Generosity. Blessedness.  
Seeing the world with a new perspective.  
This is the way forward.

As you think and talk about your church, please don’t fall into to deficit thinking. Don’t ask, “what’s missing here?” or “what used to be?”  
Instead, ask, “what resources has God has placed in our midst for this season of ministry?”  
Focus on assets and gifts. Then invite everyone to share.

As you think of your own life, dig deep. Do the hard work of introspection.  
Is there a talent you’ve not shared recently?  
Are there things cluttering your home you could part with to help others?  
Is God asking you to do something only you can do to show you are living out of abundance?

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<sup>6</sup> White Rock Center of Hope – About Us. [www.whiterockcenterofhope.org/aboutus.html](http://www.whiterockcenterofhope.org/aboutus.html)

As your guest preacher I'm glad I didn't review today's readings before accepting the invitation and I'm grateful to have explored them alongside you.

It is my prayer that you and I would live the abundant lives God intends for us.

And, it is my strong conviction that as we lead generous lives – freely sharing our time, talent, and treasure – we are doing the essential work of the church by building God's kin-dom right here in our neighborhood.

May God grant us the courage to make it so.

Amen.