

## Easter 4A

Let me admit to you frankly that this shepherd-gate-sheep stuff does almost nothing for me. I don't usually look forward to what is sometimes called Good Shepherd Sunday, and this year is my least favorite version of the day, because the dominating Christological image is Jesus as a gate for sheep, which just doesn't set my spirit soaring. And I am aware that this doesn't put me in the best company. In the middle of the gospel passage we heard this morning, John reports, "Jesus used this figure of speech with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them." The they and them here is the Pharisees, Jesus' consistent rivals and sometimes enemies throughout the Gospel. And I find myself standing right alongside them saying, "What is he talking about and why should we care?" It's, uh, not my preferred company, nor is it my preferred posture of reverent, excited friendship with our Lord.

The sheep stuff goes on for the entirety of John chapter 10. But buried beneath all this fleece, Jesus gives a kind of mission statement, a definition of the purpose of the incarnation. He says, "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." Now, this is meaty, this is something to chew on—like a nice thick mutton chop (see what I did there?). The whole point of Jesus' life and ministry is to enable us to have life, and to have it in abundance. I hope that I don't have to tell you that abundant life and abundant wealth are in no way the same thing, despite the lies of the devil and many television spiritual entrepreneurs. But knowing that abundant life and being rich aren't synonymous, what on earth does life in abundance mean? Specifically, what can it mean here, now, amidst the grief and despair and hopelessness and rage that typify our current moment in the United States, the Chicago area, and the world?

What does it mean that Jesus brought abundant life to *us*, who are ruled by charlatans, thieves, bandits, and cowards? What constitutes abundant life in a city where 4,368 people were shot last year, 521 of them in Austin, exactly a mile away from where we worship this morning? A world in which Syria can be ripped apart and the world pretends that the most at-risk children on earth are threats to our safety? After we have sorted through the sheep puns (an important task), this is the deadly serious paradox that this text leaves us with this morning: what does it mean to be a people who believe Jesus' promise to bring us abundant life, while we live in a world that has in so many ways perfected the art of bringing death?

First let me say that I find it usually to be the case that if you receive a promise from God, an invitation into vocation tends to come with it. If Jesus brings us life abundant, then we who are alive are called to participate in making the conditions that will allow others to live. And in fact I don't think that you need too much of an admonition on this score. Last week I was at an interfaith meeting of religious leaders—clergy and lay—and a member of Oak Park Temple, the local synagogue, told me, "Eric, you said St. Christopher's is small, but every time I go to an event in Oak Park, River Forest, or Forest Park that is about service or justice I meet someone from St. Christopher's." She proceeded to list about six events that no one had mentioned to me, where you were out helping people and bending the world toward justice for all God's children.

And so I won't dwell on that invitation or call, but will instead turn to our reading from Acts to flesh out the picture of the abundant life that happens after we encounter Jesus. Throughout this Easter season, our first reading each Sunday has been from the

second chapter of Acts. What happens early in Acts is that the resurrected Jesus ascends into heaven and tells his friends to wait for something big to happen. They wait until the day of Pentecost, when the Holy Spirit descends on them like tongues of fire and they spill out into the streets in ecstasy all speaking different languages. The people in the streets miraculously all hear their own languages being spoken until eventually Peter delivers the sermon that we have worked our way through over the last three weeks and three thousand people become Christians in one fell swoop. Today's reading happens immediately after that remarkably concise and effective newcomers class and tells us what life was like among those very first Christians in Jerusalem, the first of the many ways that the church has found to try to witness to the great love that has changed our lives.

It is a compelling picture of Christian life abundant. This community is the first result of the exuberant outpouring at Pentecost, when God's grace was spread so recklessly that no room could contain it, not even any one language could contain it. It took the plethora of human language all brought together even to approach expressing it. If Pentecost is a classic expression of God's abundance, then it is worth remembering that God's abundant life immediately creates a community. And what a community.

The people's lives are deeply interpenetrated. They are with each other daily, in public and in each other's homes as they devote themselves to teaching, fellowship, breaking bread, prayer, reverence, sharing, and worship with glad and generous hearts. This community expands our image of what it means to be a church defined by mission, rather than obligation or status. Clearly our usual notion of mission is covered: the poor are cared for by the intensity of the culture of sharing; the "wonders and signs" are almost certainly works of healing—even of those with preexisting conditions; and God gives them numerical growth as the grace spills more and more, always overflowing the ever-expanding container of the members of the church.

But it's not just these works of mercy and evangelism, and I think this is crucial. The community of abundant life is also devoted to teaching, fellowship, and prayer. Learning, hanging out, and praying are indispensable elements of communal Christian abundant life.

I'm dwelling on this early church way of living abundantly because their context, while different from ours, is relevant for ours. They, too, were ruled by charlatans and thieves who had perfected living by violence and death. The church was born in the shadow of the unholy pact between the empire and the local religious leadership that nailed together the cross. In this death-dealing context, the earliest church lived abundantly without political power; with hope that was for the world but not dependent on the world; with glad and generous hearts that did not pretend that everything was okay but also were not fooled into thinking that evil would win.

I know that I don't need to tell you that the abundant life Jesus brings us invites us into the work of caring for the poor and the sick. But I wonder if I do need to encourage you to have glad and generous hearts. To remind you to laugh, to take joy in each other in the streets, to invite each other into your homes. To learn and to love, to learn in order better to love. Jesus has come not to give us power but to give us life, and to give it so abundantly that we cannot help but share it. Amen.