

Fourth Sunday of Easter May 3, 2020

Acts 2:42-47 - Psalm 23 - John 10:1-10

I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly. This is the promise of Jesus. That in him is life. And life that exceeds all expectations.

I got a text on Thursday saying that Don had died early that morning at age 99. If ever there was someone who had an abundant life in Jesus- it was Don. I've known his two sons and their families for almost 20 years now. It was only in the last three years I had the privilege of really getting to know Don. A more thoughtful, faithful, inquisitive man you will not find.

Don went from working on the Manhattan Project during WWII to eventually teaching at Iowa State University in Ames. He and his wife Bernice responded to the call of the church to go to Tanzania and get a school going before returning to their lives in Ames and eventually, after retiring, moving to Ely.

Don was always reading (or having read to him) scripture and devotional books. He reflected on what he read deeply and lived out his faith. He told me his saying yes to going on that mission to Tanzania was partially in response to the gifts and privileges that his family experienced, especially in the successful surgery on his young daughter.

You walked into Don's room at the retirement community and you would find a picture of his large extended family. He had a steady stream of visitors- often those who would read with him. He and his son Dan were reading biographies of the presidents together. Don was a man rich in faith, rich in friends, rich in sharing with others.

His life was abundant, a cup filled to overflowing.

I have seen this same life in so many others over the years. My nana- my mother's mother. Another long-lived person of deep faith, loving family and friendships, an abiding trust in God's presence in her life. Ed – the head usher growing up at St. Mark's in Charlotte, NC. Bob, Verna, and so many more.

And they all had things in common. The same things that our readings point to today. The things those 3,000 newly baptized members of the church and their fellow believers were known for- a devotion, steadfast adherence, habit, practice- of being in scripture, of sharing a deep community with others, of worship and prayer. A trust in the provision of God such that they willingly and generously shared what they had with others in need.

And in devoting themselves to such things: they gained the good will of all those around them, they were able to do things that awed and astounded their neighbors, they had a life filled to overflowing, they had the peace of Christ which surpasses all understanding, and through the witness of their lives lived in this way- the Holy Spirit drew people into the faith.

Let me be clear, these abundant lives of faith were not without pain. Without sorrow and doubt. Without challenge.

Each of them have walked through their own dark valleys, some longer and darker than others, but the abundance in their life came from the fact that they knew that in Jesus they had a shepherd who walked with them. One whose rod would protect their lives from all that would seek it. One whose staff would guide them along the tricky pathways of life. They knew that in Jesus they had a

shepherd who had traveled this dark valley of death and had come back out again. Who knew the way and the pitfalls.

I came, Jesus says, that you may have life and have it abundantly. That gift of new life is freely given to you. It is not earned or bought.

But it is one whose fullness is found through dwelling in those things named in Acts. It is as we devote ourselves to reading, hearing, reflecting on scripture that we deepen our understanding of who God is and how God works in the world. It is in knowing these stories deep in our hearts that they can truly sustain us- even in the darkest valley. It is in knowing these stories deep in our hearts that we can see where others abuse and misuse them. It is in knowing these stories and in conversation with other believers that we are given a road map so we are not led astray.

It is as we devote ourselves to a fellowship that is deeper than doughnuts and coffee that we will find those abundant relationships with others. Ones that mean we show up at your door when someone is sick. That we treat your kids as our own. That means that what I have is yours if you need it. One that is so generous, it worries more about what others need rather than what I need. Like all good things, it is only in the practicing that we get closer to perfection. Now, human sinfulness will always come into play. In just a few chapters we'll see that not even this Acts community will be immune to those problems. From the selfishness and infighting that can occur when broken people gather. Even faithful people. But that is why there is grace and forgiveness. And for all the shortcomings our community can have, I think we can all agree that it feels so much more healthy, so much better to live in a community of people where you

can share your pain and shortcomings without judgment. Where everyone practices the 8th commandment by looking at what others do in the best possible way. Where you know that you will be cared for. Where you have a clear understanding of God's provision for you that you are willing to share yourself and your possessions freely with those in need.

It is as we devote ourselves to prayer without ceasing, prayer that involves listening as well as speaking, that we become more adept at seeing God's presence in the world. That we can discern the movement of the Spirit around us. That we can better hear God's voice and guidance in our life. Prayer is such an important part of the lives of all those who I have seen with this deep faith. An assurance of the presence of God. You can see that same emphasis in the book of Acts. Prayer or one of its associated words (prayed, pray) are mentioned twice as often as any other book in the New Testament. The disciples pray all the time. Before making big decisions, they pray when seeking personal guidance. They pray to say thank you and help. They pray...devotedly. With steadfast adherence, making it a practice, a habit- woven deeply into the fabric of their lives.

It is in and through these practices that we can better learn the sound of the voice of our shepherd. So that in the midst of so many voices that clamor for us to come and follow them, we might recognize the sound of Jesus and focus in on him, follow him, into that promised abundant life, filled to overflowing.

I think we all can relate to how that works. How many of you as parents have been able to pick your child's voice out of a noisy crowd of children playing? It is because you know your sheep. Or as children, being able to hear a distant voice calling you in from playing and know it is your mom. I was a bit older, but I still

recall being in a summer theatre company and totally forgetting my parents were going to be in the audience until I heard my mother's laugh. Then I knew just where she was.

We are able to do these things, to pick out the voice of loved ones from the cacophony because we spend time with them. We know the pitch and timbre of their voice, their cadence and accents because they have become ingrained on our hearts through repetition, by just being present with them. We recognize their voice because we have experienced their love for us and because we love them.

As we devote ourselves to the Word of God, to deep community, to prayer, to generosity towards those in need, we do the same thing. We become even more familiar with the voice of our savior. More able to pick it out of the cacophony of all that demands our attention. To hear it calling us even through the white noise of fear and uncertainty that tries to curl us in on ourselves.

When I think of Don, and Nana, and Ed, and Verna, and Bob... I want what they had... even as I know that each of us have a unique relationship with God. And so, I strive every day to devote myself more fully to the reading of scripture, to a deeper fellowship, to prayer and worship, to abundant care for others. Some days I do better than others. But then, there are moments, like these...when the world is turned upside down... that I find I can hear the voice of the shepherd more clearly. That I can remain calmer in the midst of stormy waters.

I pray each time before I preach that you will hear the voice of the shepherd in my words. The call of the one who loves you beyond all others. Jesus. I pray that each of you would have the Holy Spirit stir in your lives like those first disciples.

Stir you to do awesome wonders and signs in the name of Jesus. Things like loving your neighbor and your enemy. Things like feeding the hungry, clothing the naked, healing the sick. I pray that each of you might have life- abundantly- beyond all expectation- life filled to overflowing- rich in friends, rich in family, rich in faith.

In the midst of this time when all kinds of new habits are forming. I would invite you to explore adding one more. Or maybe expanding a habit you already have. Join our confirmands and read a chapter or part of a chapter of scripture each day. Set a timer for 10 minutes (you don't want to over do it!). Then feel free to email me if you have any questions or reflections. I'm happy to talk with you about it.

I would invite you to expand your prayer life. We talked in Lent about growing in our thanksgiving. In seeing the abundance God has given us. Perhaps start each day or end each day with 5 minutes of thank you's to God (set a timer- you don't want to over do it!).

I invite you into these things not to make yourself more acceptable to God- God has already accepted you. I invite you, because of the witness of scripture and so many others of the faith that in these ways you might better be able to hear the voice of our Shepherd and follow him wherever he goes.