

*God our shepherd, restore our souls through the teaching and fellowship, breaking of bread, and prayers of this community. Amen.*

A number of years ago I was browsing the shelves at a used bookstore. I was in the religious section, naturally. The title of one book jumped out at me: [\*God and Other Famous Liberals\*](#), by the Rev. Forrest Church.

I had never before heard God described as a liberal. I didn't know what to make of it.

Now, before you accuse me of partisan politicking, let me tell you what made me do more than simply read the back of the book and return it to the shelf.

The first thing that the author does is to define liberal as ample, generous, bounteous, lavish, indiscriminate, benevolent, openhanded, and "even prodigal." Liberal isn't just a political term, it's an attitude with which one might approach the world.

God is liberal in pouring out love and healing and grace on humanity, in the same way that you might pour a liberal amount of syrup on your pancakes in the morning.

Jesus said, "I came that they might have life, and have it abundantly."

The purpose of the incarnation, according to Jesus, was for God's children to experience the liberal grace of God, which leads to a rich and fulfilling and abundant life.

John's Gospel talks about life all the time.

The word is used 36 times in the book as a noun, and variations of the verb "to live" show up another 20 times. [http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary\\_id=67](http://www.workingpreacher.org/preaching.aspx?commentary_id=67)

In today's passage, Jesus defines what that *life* is meant to look like:

Abundant.

Lavish. Generous. Indiscriminate. Openhanded.

The life that God intends for us is one in which we all have enough.

Abundant life is governed by faith, not fear.

God doesn't want us to have a life of *scarcity*, where we have to choose between putting gas in the car and putting food on the table.

God doesn't want us to have a *subsistence-level* life, where we can make do paycheck to paycheck, but we are only one medical bill away from poverty.

When we are stuck in a mindset of scarcity or subsistence, we are governed by the fear of never having enough.

We can't help it – we know what it's like to go without the basic necessities, and we don't want to ever have to do that again. Instead of trusting that there will always be enough, we fear that we may not be able to feed our children, or have enough gas to drive to work, or pay the heating bill this winter, or cover the cost of a new prescription.

Now, there's nothing sinful about being poor. But scarcity and subsistence are not what God intends for humankind, for we who are created in God's image. Humanity is meant to have life, and have it *abundantly*.

This means that those who have enough are meant to share with those who fall short, in order for everyone to experience the abundant life that Jesus promises.

An important distinction comes into play here.

Abundance is not the same as excess.

I can pour a liberal amount of syrup over my pancakes, but there is certainly such a thing as too much of a good thing. I wouldn't want to soak the pancakes in a bowl of syrup for an hour before eating them. That would be too much. Instead of abundance, I would be drowning in excess, and that would lower the quality of my life, or at least my breakfast!

The same thing could be said about having too much wine, or too many clothes, or even too much money. At some point, abundance turns into excess, and it is no longer life-giving. God wants us to live in that space of abundance, that lies between scarcity and subsistence, and excess.

Life abundant is the point at which we have enough to be the people God created us to be, but where we don't have so much that we ignore or neglect God and neighbor for the sake of our stuff.

The earliest Christian communities embodied abundant life, according to today's reading from Acts. And God blessed them and added to their number those who were being saved.

The first Christians weren't guided by a particular political or denominational ideology. I'm pretty sure they never used a church constitution. They had leaders, of course, but everyone in the community served the cause wholeheartedly. They were the original model of a church being guided by *team ministry*.

The early Christian church made their calling from God their first priority – not their money or their possessions, their careers, or even their families. They focused first on God's kingdom, and the good news of Jesus, and they thrived because of it.

They must have done, right? If the first Christians hadn't followed Jesus' call to life abundant, then Christianity would have died with that first generation and we wouldn't be here today.

But we *are* here today.

We are here because of the faith of those earliest Christians.

We are here because they chose faith over fear, in order to find the abundant life that Jesus promised to them.

The followers of Jesus in the book of Acts *lived out* their faith by devoting themselves to the apostles' teaching, to fellowship, to the breaking of bread, to prayer, and to sharing all their possessions with one another.

These are the characteristics of a church that accepts and honors Jesus' gift of abundant life.

Let's parse that out, one step at a time.

Faithful living is based on the teaching of the apostles.

This meant, for the early church, literally listening to the words spoken by the people who had followed Jesus throughout his ministry.

For the church today, devoting ourselves to the teaching of the apostles means coming to worship. Hear the Word of God read in community. Listen to the sermon – or at least the children's sermon! Attend Bible study. Open up the Bible at home and get acquainted with it on your own. Learn more about the Scriptures that define your religious tradition. This is how we can devote ourselves to the teaching of the apostles.

Faithful living also focuses on fellowship.

One women's clergy group that I'm a part of uses the word "gal-ship" instead.

Fellowship – or gal-ship – means hanging out with other people in your faith community. Get to know them. Share some coffee and conversation. Get acquainted with someone over donuts after worship, or visit our coffee shop outreach ministry, or join a women's circle, or find another time to build relationships with others from this faith community.

Then there's the breaking of bread.

There are two obvious meanings to this characteristic of church.

First, share meals together. There is something special about eating with other people, recognizing our shared humanity and need for food. Like people in the early church, we can connect with others when we sit at table with them.

The second meaning, of course, is to break bread at the Lord's Table. Share Communion together, as Jesus commanded, in remembrance of me. This holy meal is an introduction to life abundant. That's why, here at Lake Edge, we offer Communion to worshippers of all ages and of all faith backgrounds.

Even if you aren't sure how you feel about Jesus today, this meal is offered *for you*, as a way to connect with the community and with the grace of God.

Next up is prayer.

This is the simplest concept but can be the most difficult to put into practice. Ask for God's help. You don't need fancy words, just the belief that abundant life is

something that everyone is supposed to have. Turn to God on behalf of other people, and ask God to bless them.

God will always listen to our prayers – and our prayers will never hurt, even if we offer them later than planned or in some illogical order. The important thing is to pray. Keep those lines of communication open with God.

Sharing all things in common.

This is where it gets really idealistic.

This practice of the early church to share all that they had is what makes most of us shrink back and say, OK. That sounds nice for those people at that time. But really, God doesn't expect that kind of behavior from us now, right? Are we really supposed to sell what we own and offer it up for the good of the community?

The short answer is, yes.

Do you trust in God? Do you believe Jesus' promise for abundant life?

Then what do you have to fear?

What could possibly go wrong by entrusting all your possessions to the community of faith?

According to the Acts passage today, it seems that the worst that could happen is that you'd end up unable to care for yourself... and then the church would care for you out of shared resources.

That's not so bad, is it?

This is where American individualism and Christian ideology conflict with one another.

According to our secular culture, each of us should be self-sufficient, able to take care of ourselves. Any possessions that we own are ours because we've *earned* them.

But according to our sacred texts, we need one another. We are dependent on the community for our lives and livelihoods. This dependency is necessary to the abundant life promised by Jesus. Our possessions belong to God first, to the community second, and to us third, if at all.

As one of my preaching colleagues put it,

“When we live in a world where some people have so much they worry about protecting what they have,

building bigger fences and stronger gates to keep people out;

while others have not enough to survive;

none of us has fullness of life.”

<http://apearlunder.blogspot.com.au/2017/05/fullness-of-life-for-all.html>

No one can experience life abundant while some of us are holding all the resources for ourselves. This is what the first Christians discovered. And they responded by sharing all things in common, so that everyone would have enough, and more than enough, to be the best person they could possibly be.

When we live our lives controlled by scarcity, always fearful that there will not be enough money, food, time... *whatever* to go around, we are denying Jesus' gift of life abundant.

But when we trust in the life of God, and the promise of Jesus – when we share what we have with others in faith that they will share with us as well – then we can finally inherit that life that John talks about throughout his entire Gospel. Life abundant.

Life that requires us to be in community with others, trusting in our community of faith and trusting in God that if we bring all that we have to God, then everyone who is part of the community will have all that they need.

This is life abundant.

This is the life that God wants for us.

This is the purpose for which Jesus came in to the world.

Today's challenge, as presented by the first followers of Jesus, is to let go of your individualism and to live primarily as a member of a community – to let your talents and possessions be used for the benefit of others. And then, only then, will we all be able to experience the abundant life that God promises to us.

You and I can be partners in bringing about the world that God intends.

I invite you today to join me in devotion to the apostles' teaching and fellowship, to the breaking of bread and the prayers, and to sharing everything in common.

I ask you to join with me in life abundant, not just for yourself, but for the whole community, since abundant life was the reason for Jesus entire ministry.

May God bless everyone who faithfully seeks to follow Jesus and to live a life that creates abundance for both their neighbors and themselves.

Amen.