

Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year A
The Rev Ian Burch
St. Mark's Episcopal Church | Milwaukee, WI
April 30, 2023

I had a marvelous theology professor named Peter Pero when I was in my 20s. He was at the end of his career and was leaning pretty heavily on his three best lectures, but I didn't care, because all three lectures were pretty great, even after I had heard them several times each. Pete was an interesting guy—an expert in the German Reformation, but also an African American scholar who had been deeply immersed in the Civil Rights movement when he was a young man. He had stories about Martin Luther King and Malcolm X. Pete would tell us that he couldn't get arrested at protests anymore because he had to make sure to take his blood pressure medication on a particular schedule but that he would bail us out if we needed it. Rumor had it that in the 70s and 80s, his basement was a smoke-filled gin joint filled with theology students who would talk until all hours of the night about how the Gospel would change the world. They all called his basement the Soul Hole, which is a pretty great name for a bar.

Pete shared revealing stories about being underestimated in German academic settings because of the color of his skin and American accent, though it quickly became apparent to his colleagues that his German was flawless. He loved to teach, though at the end of his career when I met him, I think he had decided that all the students were more or less the same and called us beloved as a way to cover up not knowing any of our names.

I bring him up because one of his three lectures was on today's reading from the Gospel of John. I can hear him standing in class, looking at our fresh faces, having no idea what any of our names were, and quoting the evangelist: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." When he would really get going, instead of the text as we have it today, he would change it to the second person, with a preacher's flair for an audience, and say "I have come that YOU may have life, and have it abundantly."

This is Good Shepherd Sunday, but I'm actually going to ignore the sheep part of the text—we can talk about that next year—and I want to talk about abundant life. Isn't it interesting that, in a religion obsessed with what happens in the NEXT life, this passage shows a Jesus intimately concerned with this one? I think that somewhere in our dread of death and fixation on heaven, Christians have forgotten about this day, this earth, this moment, and this life. This abundant life.

But what is it? I don't think that abundant life can be money. I've had the most marvelous nights with friends when we were young and didn't have five bucks to brag about. And it can be about age because I have had good times and bad in every decade. I'm not even sure that abundant life can be about place, because I have felt the whisper of God on the inside of my ear while in a church, but I have also heard it on the side of a mountain in the middle of nowhere. So, really, what IS abundant life, if it's none of these things?

I wonder if it has something to do with the sure knowledge that God is with you, intimately, no matter the circumstance. Pete would tell his stories of being in prison with his friends with a big

smile on his face. I'm sure those were difficult times, and scary, but to my mind, Pete told those stories from the perspective of someone who felt the presence of God without a doubt.

And I have known other people with a strong spiritual center talk the same way. I had a dear friend who died of cancer, and his last text to me was one of hope and perseverance, even though he knew his time on earth was short. I watched my grandmother mouth the Lord's Prayer toward the end of her life, even when she knew that she barely knew her own name as the ravages of dementia took her from us a bit at a time. And I have had the honor of sitting in the houses of some of the poorest people in the world, and yet being offered food and even a gift—as if I was Christ who had come visiting.

The Christian worldview—as radical as it is—screams abundance into the sky. We say to one another that God resources God's vision and that with the abundance of Jesus' ministry among us, there is nothing that we cannot accomplish together.

It's not that I don't care about what happens when we die. I do. And I very much hope that I find my way into the embrace of God. But what Pete was trying to teach us, and what Jesus is saying to his disciples, is that this life—messy though it can be—is holy and is blessed by Jesus. Contrary to some Christian messages about how the earth is just a dead rock hurtling through space, or a sinful waiting area for the real show at the end of time, today's Gospel is showing us that Jesus seeks to draw close to us in the humanness of our real, present, everyday lives. You had a fight with your kids? Great, that is blessed and anointed by God. You are worried about money, or politics, or your friends' divorce? Yes, that is also blessed and anointed by God. Abundant life is not a life with no obstacles. Abundant is a life where you are not alone. Look around. It is corny to say it to such a group of sophisticated people, but the truth is that Jesus did indeed bring us together today, and our lives are better for it. So, when Jesus—God on earth—tells us that abundant life is our heritage, I would suggest that we believe it.

I have come that you may have life and have it abundantly. In all my years as a pastor, I don't think that anything has ever rung more true to me. As you leave these doors, claim that abundant life as your own, just as Jesus promised. Amen.