

4 Easter April 30, 2023  
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**Understanding Jesus**  
Church of the Good Shepherd, Athens, Ohio

Have you ever experienced difficulty understanding a new concept, reason for a change, or different method of doing something than you are familiar with? I have watched many people struggle to understand the pay-it-forward model for our coffee shop ministry CrossRoads Café because it is so completely different from the debt or transactional system of business that is the cultural norm. If you can relate to struggling to understand something different, then perhaps you might find today's Gospel comforting, because we just heard Jesus' disciples shared that same struggle.

Today's Gospel reveals Jesus' attempt to explain to his disciples how they can tell he is more than a wisdom teacher, prophet, or miracle worker, he is God's Messiah. His explanation utilized concepts his disciples were probably familiar with in the description of what makes a good shepherd. In Jesus' day a ruler was respected for being aware and sympathetic to the conditions of their people, a characteristic described as knowing their people by name. Modern rulers or leaders have a much different set of standards and expectations. It seems the more powerful or influential or important a modern leader is, whether it's a president, CEO, military general or admiral, or business owner, the farther removed they are from their employees, customers, and community.

When Jesus is mistaken for a modern leader, there is a tendency to ascribe the same distance and indifference to him, which can make it difficult to understand what Jesus meant about being a good shepherd in today's Gospel. To help his disciples and us understand he is of God, not their cultural norm, Jesus switched gears and attempted to plainly explain he did not come for power, prestige, to accrue wealth or status, but so all people can have life and have it abundantly.

This can also be difficult to understand. Our modern culture struggles to define life as something other than consuming oxygen and nutrients, reproducing, and expelling waste. And when we hear the word *abundant*, we tend to think of big: big numbers, lots of stuff, that gives a sense of security. But in his life, death, and resurrection Jesus did not exemplify life or abundance that looked anything like that. Jesus shows us life is not necessarily just the basics, and abundance is not about accumulation, it is a practice.

Fortunately for us, there are examples of life in abundance right here, which can help us not only understand what Jesus was talking about, they can help us practice this stuff of resurrection life in our own lives and in this parish. One of my favorite examples is from a wedding several years ago. I learned about this wedding from social media, and it was the talk of the country for a brief time. If you are familiar with it, this is a good time to remember.

Photographers get to observe a lot of different family dynamics at weddings. Such events can be emotional and bring out all kinds of unresolved family issues. Like the wedding in Cana, they can also reveal resurrection life. This particular wedding took place in Ohio and like many families, the parents of the bride were divorced and had both married other people. Weddings can (but certainly don't have to be) uncomfortable for those second spouses who are never really sure of their place in the family. The traditional roles of mother of the bride and father of the bride are pretty specific and don't leave room for any additions.

So, when the bridal march began, the photographer at this wedding was surprised to see the father of the bride came down the aisle by himself. He went directly to the bride's stepfather, who was seated several rows from the front, and invited him to walk not his daughter, but their daughter down the aisle together. The stepfather accepted the invitation with tears in his eyes and by the time the bridal march began again, no one at that wedding, not even the photographer, had a dry eye.

When the news media heard about this wedding, they reached out to the father and stepfather who both agreed to do interviews explaining why they did what they did. In those interviews it was revealed the two men did not get along well. They were not friends and described their relationship as strained. But, the father of the bride said, in that important moment in the bride's life, and the family's life, there was something far more important than limited traditional roles, there was love. The father of the bride recognized while he didn't necessarily like his ex-wife's husband, he is a good father figure for his daughter (which does not diminish nor eliminate his own fatherhood) and a good husband to his ex-wife and as he was about to walk his daughter down the aisle, he felt it necessary to make room for her stepfather, because he is part of the family. For his part, the stepfather understood it was equally necessary to stand in love with a young woman whose life he was an essential part of, who he also loves, and share in that journey down the aisle at her wedding.

It was perhaps the best gift a father and stepfather could give their daughter and son-in-law and it is a stunning example of the abundant life Jesus was talking about in today's Gospel. Abundant life isn't getting as much of whatever it is you think you want (whether that is money or food or property or status or prestige or attention or power) and holding onto it so no one else can have any. That grasping is called scarcity. Scarcity, just as it sounds, is scared there is not enough for everyone and is afraid to share or invite others in.

Abundant life is the belief and trust that we already have more than enough because God has already given us everything we all need. Therefore, abundant life is brave, vulnerable, and gracious in stepping back and making room, even for people or ideas that might make us feel uncomfortable. Discomfort does not always indicate someone is not safe. It can mean we are outside a comfort zone, which is the place where we can grow and learn and gain understanding.

That is what two men did at their daughter's wedding, and by so doing showed us all the abundant life of the Risen Jesus is not something for a next life, it is already with us all, waiting for us to choose to live it. Alleluia.