



Reflections magazine

From The Episcopal Diocese of West Texas
Spring/Summer 2015

Abundant Life

*I came that they may have life,
and have it abundantly (John 10:10).*

The Spring/Summer 2015 edition of
Reflections magazine.

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About the Cover:

Tree of Life, by artist Patsy Sasek, represents God's abundance in nature. Patsy is a working artist, specializing in water color and mixed media. Her work is often displayed at Cathedral House Gallery at the Bishop Jones Center in San Antonio. Patsy helps organize and display the Gallery openings which occur three to four times each year. Listen to an interview with Patsy at www.reflections-dwtx.org.

Read the magazine online at www.reflections-dwtx.org

This issue as a resource for further study

Because every issue of *Reflections* explores a single topic, the magazine lends itself to further study by small groups or Sunday morning classes. See pages 24-26 for resources and suggestions.

The purpose of *Reflections* is not to give answers but rather to incite inquisitiveness. The writers and editor of *Reflections* hope the magazine's contents will inspire further exploration and reflection on each topic, especially as the topics relate to daily life. Look for "Go Deeper" questions at the end of each article marked with a well and pail.



We invite your feedback. If you have comments on this issue or suggestions for future issues, send a note to Marjorie George, editor, email below.

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by Marjorie George

Naming Abundance

It was more than ten years ago, so perhaps I can speak of it with some clarity. A suspicious spot on a routine mammogram, bad biopsy results, a lumpectomy, six weeks of radiation. A few months to recover from it all. I'm somewhat embarrassed to even claim to be a breast cancer survivor when I think about the women whose roads have been so much harder to walk than was mine.

I recall it now mostly as an interruption in my well-planned life, although my friends and family probably recollect better than I the moments of terror, anger, frustration and exhaustion. Please hear in my story that I take cancer seriously and recognize the devastation it wreaks in lives and that I know myself to be blessed.

Some say that God gives us trials and tribulations to make us stronger. I think that God takes the stories that life gives us and shows us how to use them to become stronger. So it is with my cancer. My take-away from my cancer story is about abundance.

For it was in that time that I was thrown into an environment very different from the reality that had been my life - Anglo, well educated, middle class, self-sufficient woman that I was. But what I did bring to my cancer experience was resources. Did I need a good doctor? Episcopal churches are full of good doctors and good connections to them. Did I worry about medical costs? Yes, but I was fully insured, and the costs were manageable. Did I worry about losing my job? Not really. "Take the time you need," my boss said. I was surrounded with resources.

How many women in San Antonio, in south Texas, in much of the world do not know this abundance of resources when they face cancer? How many do not have access to good doctors? How many ignore a lump in the breast because they do not have any money to deal with it? How many can't even get annual routine mammograms and reveal cancer in its early stage as I did?

So ultimately this is not a story about cancer; it is a story about abundance. And really so much more than the abundance of good doctors and medical insurance. Even more important was the community of support in which God had placed me and the moments he was there when my mind took me to the precipice of the "what ifs" and invited me to leap into that chasm of despair.

When Jesus delivered his proclamation that he came to give life - abundant life - it was in the midst of his treatise on being the Good Shepherd. "I take care of my sheep," he said. "My sheep know my voice," he said. "I am the gatekeeper to the sheepfold," he said. Bishop David Reed says this so much better than I in his article that begins on page 6 of this issue.

But note with which Christ contrasts himself. "Thieves and robbers come only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life and have it abundantly" (John 10:10). And once again, as so often happens in Scripture, Christ is not giving us a command as much he is telling us about choices and consequences. You can choose to follow ways that lead to what the world calls abundance - accumulation of possessions, status, power, big bank accounts - or you can choose to follow me, says Christ. The world's way is going to kill your soul in the end. My way is abundant life.

When the contributing writers and I started crafting this issue of *Reflections*, I had in mind to answer the question, “What does it mean to have abundant life?” But I cannot answer that question for you; I can only answer it for myself. I know what it does not mean – and for sure it does not mean placing our hope in our material goods, our own little plans, our bank accounts, our status, years and years of hard work, or even our good health. That kind of hope consorts with thieves and robbers.

It’s really about recognizing what abundant life is, isn’t it? In this issue, Bishop Reed says we do that by knowing his voice. Carol and Dan Morehead advise remembering our roots. Jay George says we learn about abundance right where we are, or at least we are given opportunities to do so. Jennifer Wickham says we recognize it by cultivating gratitude. Chica Younger agrees. Lera Tyler reminds us to share joyfully even when we have little from which to share. Mary Carolyn Watson recognizes abundance in little hands that are busy, busy, busy.

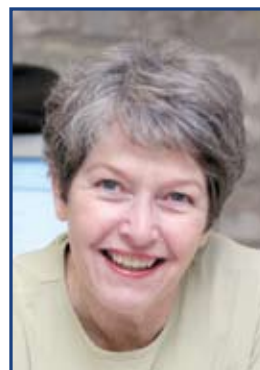
The spiritual journey is always about going deeper, seeing new revelations, spending a little more time with Scripture to get to the meanings of Christ’s words for our (abundant) lives. With this issue we have added some opportunities for individual and group reflection related to each article and the theme as a whole. We invite you to ask your own questions of yourself and your communities, remembering that Ranier Maria Rilke urged living the questions. “Live the questions now,”

said the poet. “Perhaps then, someday far in the future, you will gradually, without even noticing it, live your way into the answer” (from *Letters to a Young Poet*, 1903).

Here’s a good question to start with: Where do I see God’s abundance all around me? *R*



Thieves and robbers come to steal and kill and destroy. (John 10:10).



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Itchy Ears

by the Rt. Rev. David Reed

Our dog doesn't have fleas, but he does have itching ears. Oh, the relief when Critter can rub his head on a carpet. Or, doing what many of us would love to be able to do, he reaches up with his hind leg and scratches vigorously. Itchy ears are annoying.

Far more seriously, people suffering with schizophrenia often "hear voices"—divine or demonic or both—that are as real as you talking to me. (Studies indicate that these voices affect the ears and hearing just like normal sound.) These itchy ears are debilitating and destructive.

St. Paul warns his young disciple Timothy that "the time is coming when people will not endure sound teaching, but having itching ears, they will accumulate for themselves teachers to suit their own likings, and will turn away from listening to the truth and wander into myths" (2 Timothy 4:3-5). This will be hard for us to understand,



but there was a time when Christians, like people in general, were attracted to, and distracted by, fads and trends and those who promised an easier way to follow Jesus.

Jesus himself anticipates this. He warns people to count the cost of following him, describes what can happen to those who are identified with him, cautions against victory that doesn't include the cross. He might have done better if he'd hired a PR firm or a spin doctor to massage and lighten up his message. Hard words like his make my ears itch.

In the great and beautiful chapter on the Good Shepherd (John 10), Jesus contrasts himself with "hired hands" who don't really care about the sheep and scam at the first sign of danger. He is the good (the true) shepherd who will lay down his life to save the sheep. Before this, Jesus likens himself to "the gatekeeper" who lets the sheep in and out of their pen, the shepherd whom the sheep trust because "they know his voice," and, finally, "the door of the sheep" who protects the gathered sheep. Those of us non-agrarian types who are slightly confused by these slightly mixed metaphors can take comfort in St. John's report that, "This figure Jesus used with them, but they did not understand what he was saying to them."

So Jesus (who is also the Good Teacher) tries again. He says that phony messiahs have come like "thieves and robbers" to lead the sheep astray. These pretenders come to "steal and kill and destroy." That is, they come to take away life. They subtract from and try to negate the life God intends. These predators speak softly to wooly-headed, itchy-eared sheep of greener pastures and cool, still water; but what they've got in mind is their own power and the death of the sheep.

In contrast, Jesus the Good Shepherd comes "that they may have life, and have it abundantly." And this overflowing, extravagant life becomes available because "the good shepherd lays down his life for the sheep . . . I am the good shepherd; I know my own and my own know me, as the Father knows me and I know the Father; and I lay down my life for the sheep."

These words themselves illustrate and enact what the Living Word does: extravagantly, exuberantly, abundantly giving life and overcoming death with life. In the midst of this passage warning of the dangers sheep face, Jesus plants this wondrous news. He has come to give us real life in abundance.

Now, I like this idea of abundance because I've got plenty of stuff and there's always newer and better stuff to get . . . in abundance. But Jesus doesn't promise material abundance, and he spends quite a bit of time talking counter to that. (Think about how he said that a camel squeezing through the eye of a needle has an easier time of it than a rich man trying to drag his abundance into heaven. Or think of his beatitude: "Blessed are the poor in spirit.") To buy into the relentless voices telling us that life consists of getting more and more is to have the wool pulled over our eyes by "thieves and robbers."

These predators speak softly to wooly-headed, itchy-eared sheep of greener pastures and cool, still water; but what they've got in mind is their own power and the death of the sheep.

But I'm not sure that going the other way, becoming "anti-abundant," is any guarantee of the abundant life Jesus offers. You can be materially, even voluntarily, poor and be as smug, angry, resentful and mean as someone with lots of stuff.

I wonder if the abundant life Jesus offers has to do, simply, with knowing him. Earlier in John's Gospel (6:66-68), a number of disciples fall away because of Jesus' hard teachings. He asks the Twelve, "Do you also wish to go away?" And Peter says, "Lord, you have the words of eternal life; and we have believed, and have come to know,

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● *Itchy Ears*

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that you are the Holy One of God.” And later, in his soaring prayer at the Last Supper, Jesus prays, “. . . this is eternal life, that they know thee the only true God, and Jesus Christ whom thou hast sent” (17:3). Notice the close linking of believing, knowing and living. To know Jesus is to truly come alive. We can’t know him unless we follow, and we can’t follow unless we trust him like sheep trust their shepherd. Abundant life consists in following Jesus, day by day, coming to know him, and coming to accept more fully his complete knowing and loving us. We will come to trust his voice above all others.

For those of us with itchy ears, prone to finding teachers who say what we want to hear

and wandering like lost sheep into myths, here is the Good Shepherd who truly loves us calling us to listen, to turn and follow. For those of us who have a hard time distinguishing between the voice that calls us to life and the voices that promise life but deal in death, here is Jesus recalling and reminding and calling us each by name, saying, “This is the way . . . I am the way to abundant life.”

R



The Rt. Rev. David Reed is bishop coadjutor of the Episcopal Diocese of West Texas.



Go Deeper

Questions for Study and Reflection

- 1. Why do you think John placed the sentence "I have come to bring abundant life . . ." in the midst of the Good Shepherd story?**
- 2. What or who are the thieves and robbers in your life that call you to follow them and thereby threaten to take away real life? If you have encountered this in the past, how did you find your way back to the Good Shepherd?**
- 3. How do you tell the difference between the shepherd's voice and the false voices of life?**



Living in God's Creative Intention

by the Rev. Carol Morehead
and Dan Morehead

Once, a man and woman lived a life of abundance. Before them were the wonders of creation, important work, and regular communion with God and one another. But even in paradise, desire slithered in, and they slowly became uncertain and discontent with the bounty they knew.

Wanting replaced knowing; secrets replaced trust; anxiety and scarcity replaced satisfaction and plenty. They and their children began to live in a pattern of competition, anxiety, envy, jealousy, and uncertainty.

Today, we too feel this deep grinding rhythm of uncertainty, of lack and scarcity, of jealousy and consumption, of turning away from what we were given toward the disintegrating pattern of always wanting something we seldom really need. We fail to enjoy the abundance in which we were created.

What is abundance? Abundance is the spiritual recognition that we are repeatedly given far more than we could ever need, hope, or expect. Put this way, abundance is a rather straightforward idea. Yet it is ever so difficult to experience. While we know that we have far more than we need (both spiritually and physically), we don't really notice it. Instead, we notice what we might lose, what we might not get in the future, and ways we can

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get what we want. In short, we spend far too much time fretting and worrying about not having enough and grasping for more than enough.

Adam and Eve focus on what they do not have: the fruit of the tree of knowledge, and the tree of life. Rather than wait with contentment for God's time, Adam and Eve reach out and take more for themselves, losing the peace and contentment they do have.

We are not alone in this fear and desire. Something drives the mad rush for wealth, status, and sex that we see everywhere around us. Something, perhaps, as old as human nature. Or so scripture might tell us in that quaint story of Adam and Eve in the garden. On the surface, it

seems a simple, even naïve tale to explain the origins of human problems. Adam and Eve are placed in a garden, a beautiful garden which contains everything they need. They are coworkers and co-creators with God. All they have to do is be with God, be with each other, and do the work that God has given them to do. Deceptively simple. Instead of being content and grateful, Adam and Eve focus on what they do not have: the fruit of the tree of knowledge, and the tree of life. Rather than wait with contentment for God's time, Adam and Eve reach out and take more for themselves, losing the peace and contentment they do have.

In the end, their plight seems all too familiar: Having plenty but not enjoying it, being given so much but focusing on what they don't have, trying to play God to get more. Ironically, the tale implies that God ultimately wants to give them the fruit

of both trees. The tree of life appears again at the end of the biblical narrative, where "the leaves of that tree are for the healing of the nations" (Revelation 22:2). But, much like the rest of us, Adam and Eve cannot seem to wait patiently for God's time and trust in the abundance that they already have. They cannot allow God to bless them in the natural course of events; they mess things up by trying to force what they want. And so it goes through the rest of Genesis: Abraham and Sarah try to force offspring out of God by shamefully using Hagar; Rebecca and Jacob cheat blind old Isaac to steal what God has already promised them, and so on.

We are not so different from the child-like Adam and Eve. We too forget that we are created to rest in the shelter of God's love and care, content to enjoy God, each other, and our work. And whenever we stretch out our hands to take 'more' by force, we too lose the paradise we have been given. Ironically, that paradise still awaits us. All the love, all the goodness, all the joy for which we were created and could ever dream of has already been given to us. They await us in God, who stands ever ready. "Our hearts are restless until they rest in Thee," as Augustine of Hippo so famously said. To experience security and contentment, we do not need to do anything. Nor do we need to attain anything to receive God's abundance – we already have it. God's abundance lies at the deepest level of our created nature – it is our default position.

In the cool of the evening, God calls to us. All we have to do is let go our grasp and open our hands to receive. Ours is to accept the bounty of what has already been given. We have to slow down and enjoy that One Thing, without which we have nothing, and with which we possess everything. *R*



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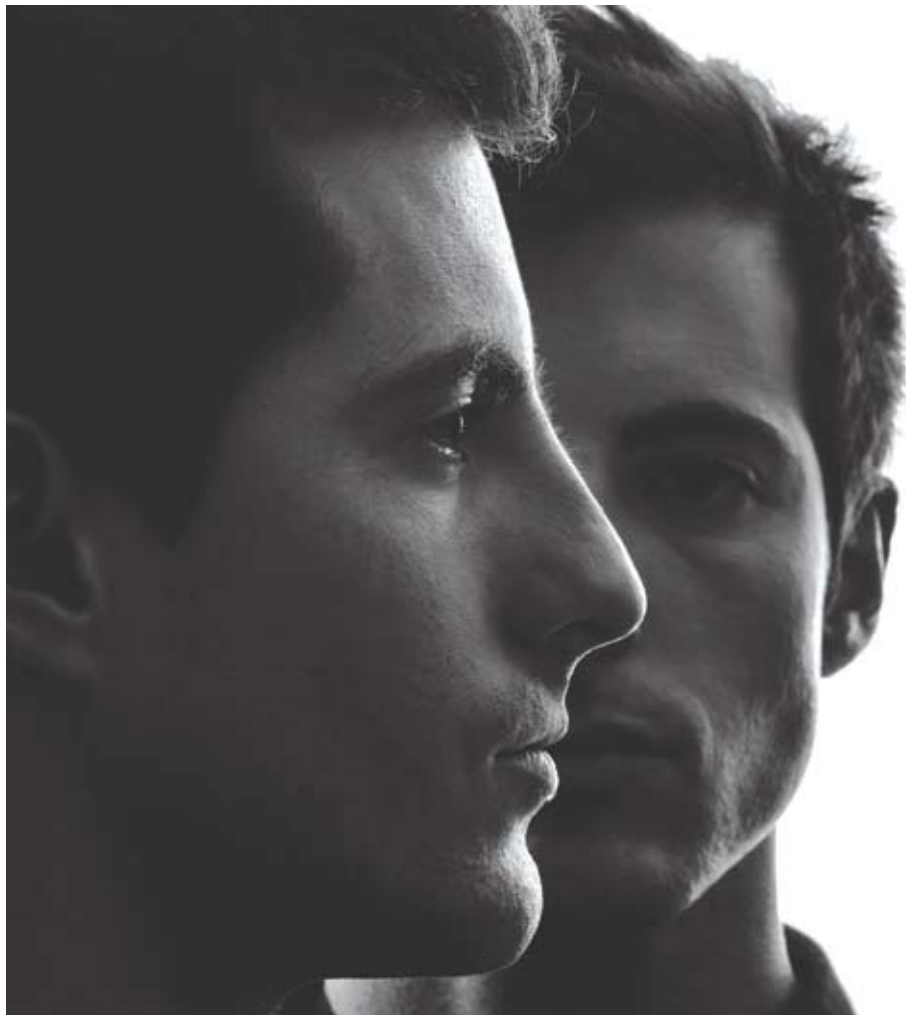


Go Deeper



Questions for Study and Reflection

1. What has God planted in your garden - people, job, family, health, sufficient money? Have you lost peace and contentment by wanting more?
2. Do you spend time fretting and worrying about what you don't have rather than recognizing what you do have?
3. Read Genesis 1:26-31. Stop and enjoy that story for a while. Imagine yourself in the garden before the serpent shows up. That's the way it's supposed to be.



The Other Brother

by the Rev. Jay George

“A man had two sons,” Jesus tells the crowd, which consists of tax collectors, sinners, and grumbling pharisees and scribes. “The younger of them said to his father, “give me my share of the property that belongs to me.”

We all know the story (Luke 15:11-32): the younger son squanders his inheritance on loose living and becomes destitute. So he determines to swallow his pride and return home, where his father showers him with abundance. It is a story of sin, repentance, and forgiveness, we think. A story of how quickly God welcomes the lost who became found. And it is that.

But what about the other brother?

Nobody invites him to the party. The other brother, the older one.

Nobody invites him in. No phone call, no text, no e-vite. He doesn't even know what's going on. He has to ask one of the servants. From what little we see of him in Luke's gospel, the older brother comes off as kind of a jerk. He's one of those guys who gets mad if you bring too many items into the 15-item check-out line, but thinks his 17 items are no big deal because, well, he is somehow entitled. Listen to his self-righteous little speech:

"Look, these many years I have served you, and I never disobeyed your command, yet you never gave me a young goat, that I might celebrate with my friends. But when this son of yours came, who has devoured your property with prostitutes, you kill the fattened calf for him!" (Luke 15:29-30 ESV).

You see what he does to his dad there? "These many years I've served you." Not loved you. Not worked with you. Not learned from you. Served you. "And I never disobeyed your command." He wants his own fattened calf, but look who he wants to celebrate with, his friends! Not his family. Presumably not his father; certainly not his brother.

And why not? Because "that son of yours," that good-for-nothing, that guttersnipe, that wastrel, that . . . that . . . that PRODIGAL has thrown away all the money you gave him, our inheritance, not just the interest but the capital, gone, wasted, thrown away on cheap wine and fast living.

Which is just what prodigal means, really. Prodigal doesn't mean underdog, or returning, or someone who finally gets it right. We use it that way all the time, "he came back from injury to lead his team to the win; the prodigal son returns." Wrong. That's not what prodigal means at all. Prodigal means wasteful and immoderate, particularly as relates to money; spendthrift. The

prodigal is not the one who gets it right in the end. The prodigal is the one who gets it wrong. Just like the older brother.

That's right, the older brother. We've long called this passage from Luke the parable of prodigal son, in direct reference to the younger son who squandered his inheritance. And lately it has become fashionable to refer to the prodigal father as it relates to the father's recklessly generous nature. Yet the elder son is no less prodigal than either of them.

He worked on the family land for years, day in and day out. Did he learn nothing from his father?

The younger son is separated from the father's abundance, but the older brother is separated in the midst of the father's abundance.

This is more than a parable of the prodigal son. This is a parable of the prodigal sons. Sure, the younger son wastes his money. But the older brother wastes his time. He wastes his experience. He wastes his opportunity to learn from the father. The younger son is separated from the father's abundance, but the older brother is separated in the midst of the father's abundance.

When the younger son returns, the father throws discretion to the wind and runs to meet him. Yet when the older brother hears the celebration, he refuses to enter the house, forcing his father to come out to him. Has he learned nothing of grace?

When the younger son returns, the father cuts short his apology, immediately pulling him back into the family. He doesn't make him beg, he doesn't even let him finish. He calls for the best robe, shoes for his feet, a ring for his hand. The father dresses him as a son, not a servant. But later, when the father leaves the party because the older

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brother won't come in, he makes his father beg. His father entreats and pleads with him, to no avail. Has he learned nothing of mercy?

When the younger son returns, the father doesn't keep him at arms length. He hugs him and kisses him and showers him with abundance. The younger son is prepared to accept the place of a servant, but his father welcomes him as a son. And his brother? His brother won't even name him as such. "This son of yours," he calls him, because "he is no brother of mine." Has the older son learned nothing of community, of forgiveness, of inclusion, acceptance and love?

So who's the real prodigal here? At least the younger son comes to his senses. The older brother lives in the midst of the father's abundance, yet he acts from a place of scarcity. He is just as lost as his brother, just as alienated from the father. He, too, has run off to a far country.

Pray the day comes when he longs for what his father has already given him, that he opens his eyes and sees the invitation has been his all along.

R



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Go Deeper

Questions for Study and Reflection

- 1. Some of us can tell the story of being the younger brother: alcoholism, addiction, being the outcast. But perhaps all of us can better tell the story of being the older son, living the midst of God's abundance and failing to see it. When have you refused to see and accept God's grace, mercy, inclusion, acceptance, and love.**
- 2. Read the entire scripture passage again: Luke 15: 11-32. Where do you see yourself in it?**
- 3. When have you resented another person's good fortune while seeing only what you lack?**

by Jennifer Wickham

Cultivating Gratitude

The word “gratitude” has appeared in our public consciousness with increasing frequency in the last several years. The internet is full of information about journals, beads, crystals, diets, and meditation exercises to help us practice an “attitude of gratitude.”

Posts on Facebook and other social networks encourage us to accept gratitude challenges lasting anywhere from 21 to 100 days. There are countless classes, retreats, and book studies on the topic. The Bible, naturally, is full of passages about giving thanks and having a thankful heart.

Over the years, I have relied on many of these tools to help me become more grateful. Some tools—and some periods of my life—have proven more fruitful than others. Likewise, some terms are more appropriate than others to describe the role gratitude plays in my life. Is it a discipline? An attitude? A practice? A habit? The answer is probably “yes” to all of these, but for me, gratitude seems more like a relationship which must be cultivated.

Depending on the context, “cultivation” refers to many different things: preparation, utilization, growth, training, development, acquisition, and application. In the context of a farm or garden, soil must be prepared for planting. Seeds must be planted and tended as they grow, and mature plants may be propagated or left to go to seed so that new life may continue. Harvests may be gathered and used to sustain and foster life of a different sort. All of this involves cultivation. So it is with gratitude.

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Because a spirit of gratitude was cultivated in me as a child, it is oftentimes (but not always) as natural to me as breathing. I am keenly aware that I lack, and I know that all I am (and have) comes from the abundant generosity of God's grace in my life. Henri Nouwen once observed, "Perhaps nothing helps us make the movement from our little selves to a larger world than remembering God in gratitude. Such a perspective puts God in

For me, cultivating gratitude means recognizing the situations, people, and things around me that make me better. Some provide nourishment. Others offer shelter or comfort. Still others, because of the challenges they bring, prune me and force me to grow as I should.

view in all of life, not just in the moments we set aside for worship or spiritual disciplines. Not just in the moments when life seems easy."

I try to be aware of the world I inhabit and seek to sharpen my eyes more acutely to the tiniest of blessings around me. I believe that living this way breaks up the soil of my heart and makes room for all types of useful seed-planting by God and others. I also know that if I am not nourished and fertilized, my life will not produce anything suitable for harvest. I will be of no use to God, myself, or anyone I may encounter.

There is a traditional type of Native American companion planting arrangement known as a Three Sisters Garden. Corn, beans, and squash are sown together as three interdependent sisters who grow and nourish one another. Corn provides a natural pole for the beans to climb, and the beans, in return, help make the corn sturdier and wind-resistant. Beans also contribute much-needed

Gratitude is a Practice

by Chica Younger

We all live in a culture that seeks happiness. As a child I thought that only when things were going my way or that I had received a longed for word, object, relationship or accolade could I be happy.

As I grew older, I realized that there were some people I knew who had real tragedies in their lives but were consistently full of good humor, kindness, and peace in the midst of pain and sadness. These special persons could grieve, be sad or disappointed, even angry. But underlying their loss or sadness they also had a sense of an interior joy

that emanated through their tough times.

Observing this phenomenon in others, I could see that their acceptance of life on life's terms gave room for the joy that springs from a sense of gratitude. It seems to me now that the practice of acceptance leads to gratefulness for all things.

Gratitude for me is a discipline that I am committed to on a daily basis. This inner joy is the experience of claiming the true value of my life. It is seizing and accepting the gifts that are unearned, not bought, and freely given. Gratitude holds an opportunity in each day, in each moment.

nitrogen to the soil. Squash leaves are a natural mulch to help preserve soil moisture and discourage the growth of weeds. Each benefits from the others, and none would do



The Three Sisters Garden.

as well alone as they do living within their garden community. Are they aware of this dependence on one another? I wonder.

For me, cultivating gratitude means recognizing the situations, people, and things around

me that make me better. Some provide nourishment. Others offer shelter or comfort. Still others, because of the challenges they bring, prune me and force me to grow as I

should. It is my responsibility to pay attention and ask for God's wisdom to understand and appreciate them. And as my relationship with God deepens, the hope is that my eyes become more able to see the world around me in the way God does.

Gratitude is a symbol of resurrection in my life. It allows me to recognize abundance in my scarcity. It helps me discover hope in times of despair. I am reminded that life begins again, even when seemingly absent in times of death. All impossibilities become possible. I am encouraged by this, and the worries I carry no longer occupy the biggest spaces of my life. The eyes of my heart open and see all the ways God faithfully sustains me day after day. And, as a sister in the garden, gratitude makes me available to others so that I too can nurture, shelter and cultivate resurrection in those around me.

Practically speaking, there are things I can do to cultivate gratitude. I must pray

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No one is grateful for abuse, war, oppression or bereavement. But even in these painful moments there can be a creative act for me if I can only sit quietly, observe, and listen. I confess that when the hard times roll over me, I have to be constantly vigilant. Greed, worry, anxiety, and fear can easily take hold and bring me down. It is in the practice of quiet, of intentional listening and observation, that I can be more creative and claim the opportunity of gratefulness.

Like most spiritual principles, gratitude is a way of being, a real inside job. It is never contingent on what is happening on the outside. It is a discipline and a way of life. For me this practice has been a gradual shifting perception of my view of the world and of myself.

I am daily more aware of God's love for me and the many blessings bestowed on me. I strive for increased gratitude as I see God's hand in my life and in the life of others.

THANKS BE TO GOD. There is a reason we say this at the end of a service. It is always a saying I am reminded to take into my heart and into the world. *R*



Chica Younger

● *Cultivating Gratitude* from page 17

and remember to forgive. I should complain less. I could choose the positive rather than the negative in every situation. I need to recognize all unwarranted gifts – especially the ones so easily overlooked. It is also important for me to plant myself with others who seek to live the same way. My life is enriched by a community of people who pay greater attention to their blessings than to their insufficiencies. Worry and fear strip away gratitude and separates us, but gratitude makes us able to tend one another in a spirit of Godly abundance. Needs are met. People are fed. Pain is healed.

As we enter a season of sowing and harvesting, consider where you are planted.

Be mindful of what is, and has been, planted within you. Thank God for every good and perfect gift: the meager and the grand. Cultivate gratitude in yourself, and find ways to cultivate it in others. Above all else, remember that every good and perfect gift comes from God. *R*



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Go Deeper

Questions for Study and Reflection

1. When you pay attention to the world around you, what new blessings do you see that you have overlooked before?
2. What things, people, situations nourish and fertilize your life, make you better?
3. What practices could you institute to help grow gratitude in you? In your family?
4. Who or what are the beans, corn, and squash of your daily life?



Being Egg Farmers

by the Rev. Lera Tyler

In the years before I began elementary school, my father and I were “partners” in the egg business. We fed the hens, gathered the eggs, and secured the henhouse in the evenings. We almost always had lots more eggs than the three of us could eat, so Daddy and I would put aside the extras and on Monday mornings we’d pack them up and make the rounds, delivering what we couldn’t eat to anyone we thought might use them.

This wasn’t a money-making business. In fact, we never accepted money for the eggs. They were (as we thought of it) eggs that we wouldn’t need in the week ahead. We delivered to folks who were considered poor, and we delivered to people who were well off. Everyone was delighted to have fresh eggs – and perhaps more importantly, a chance to visit with my daddy for a while.

I think that it was in these early years that I began to form an idea of what Jesus meant when he said: “I came that you might have life in its abundance.”

We certainly know abundance, don’t we? I’ve driven the 50-mile stretch of IH-10 between San Antonio and Kerrville for 40 years now. It has been transformed from being almost completely a two-lane, rural highway into something quite different. For nearly 30 miles westward from downtown San Antonio, this superhighway is now lined with an almost non-stop row of businesses: storage units, massive service stations, automobile, truck, travel trailer, and mobile home dealerships. You can buy a large variety of fast foods, Starbucks treats, outdoor pottery, building materials of all kinds, and the list goes on and on. Abundance. Lots of it.

Or is this abundance?

continued on page 20

● *Being Egg Farmers* from page 19

Abundance, as Jesus and his Israelite fore-bearers understood it was having enough to share.

It's different now because "having" has come to be understood as acquiring what we desire, and for many of us it's done almost as easily as saying: "Oh, I just have to have that!"

Congeniality isn't a prime attribute of men and women who live and think in a culture of lack. Some tables, however, were more open than others.

Having and holding on now fills attics, closets and those storage units along IH-10.

When Jesus says: "I came that you may have life in its abundance," he wasn't talking about stockpiling.

In the gospel of John, Jesus' first "sign" was transforming water into wine, and not just wine but an abundance of good wine, more wine than the steward could have imagined possible, more than enough.

Abundance is concrete: it's visible, touchable, tasteable, smellable grace.

Abundance is a state of mind: understanding that what's in front of us--what's been given to us--is enough to share.

While I was in seminary, I spent a summer working in a homeless shelter in Portland, Maine. Three days of the week I had the morning shift in the dining hall. It was crazy. The minute the doors opened at 6 a.m., there was a rush to line up. The first-comers were almost certainly assured of choices: a hot breakfast with eggs, oatmeal, juices, meat, toast. On some days, however, the late-comers would end up with only toast, dry cereal, and coffee. There was a lot of jostling, shoving, pushing, and name-calling. My job was to walk around the room, checking on the tables, anticipating conflicts and quarrels that might occur there or in the line.

Congeniality isn't a prime attribute of men and women who live and think in a culture of lack. Some tables, however, were more open than others.

One morning as the breakfast line shortened, I sat down with a group I'd eaten with several times. A bit later, one of the table regulars joined us. He



Go Deeper

Questions for Study and Reflection

1. Close your eyes and imagine that you are the homeless man in the story. You are sitting at a table surrounded with battered, ragged, hungry people. As you share your eight sausage patties, what are you feeling? A little reluctance? Hoping someone won't take a patty so you can have more? Or this man's sheer joy?

Now open your eyes and look around your house; what do you have so much of that that you can share? How do you feel about that?

2. What do you have that you can gather up and give of freely. Not just money, not just possessions, but your time, your attention, your experience. Go find a place that needs it and give joyfully.

was grinning – big time. “Look at this!” he said as he squeezed a place in the middle of the table and placed his tray in front of us.

On his plate were the usual eggs, toast, butter, six or seven containers of jelly – and eight sausage patties! Eight! (Two would have been a surprise.) Whoever had served up, for some reason, chose to be generous.

The lucky guy sat down, grinning from ear to ear. Then he picked up his plate and offered everyone at the table his sausages. In a few seconds, only one was left. It was his – and he was just as excited at having that one as he was when he’d had eight.

He was not just pleased, he was joyful. In this community’s eyes, it was almost a miracle: he’d had enough to share. In a culture of scarcity, he’d given freely.

The so-called “prosperity” gospel claims that if God has given us wealth, God wants us to have it. To a certain extent that is true. The problem comes in what we do with God’s gifts. The problem comes when we forget that we have received enough of God’s goodness to share freely with others.

A life of abundance, as Jesus has given us, is anti-hoarding, anti-accumulating.

Abundance is taking leftovers and spreading a table.

Abundance is gathering up and giving out freely. *R*



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The Parable of the Rich Fool

Someone in the crowd said to him, “Teacher, tell my brother to divide the family inheritance with me.”

But he said to him, “Friend, who set me to be a judge or arbitrator over you?”

And he said to them, “Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one’s life does not consist in the abundance of possessions.”

Then he told them a parable: “The land of a rich man produced abundantly. And he thought to himself, ‘What should I do, for I have no place to store my crops?’ Then he said, ‘I will do this: I will pull down my barns and build larger ones, and there I will store all my grain and my goods. And I will say to my soul, Soul, you have ample goods laid up for many years; relax, eat, drink, be merry.’

But God said to him, ‘You fool! This very night your life is being demanded of you. And the things you have prepared, whose will they be?’

So it is with those who store up treasures for themselves but are not rich toward God.”

Luke 12:13-21 New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)



LITTLE BLESSINGS

by Mary Carolyn Watson

One of the most vivid memories I have from this past Christmas is sitting in the living room with my husband and our two small children awaiting the arrival of my mother from the airport.

She'd called to tell us when she'd picked up her rental car, and suggested that she might get checked into her hotel first before coming to our house to see us. "Oh no," I'd replied. "Please come right now, the sooner the better."

During the 15 minutes between that phone call and my mother's knock on our front door, my husband and I sat on opposite ends of our sofa, each holding a squirming child (ages one and three) on our lap, so that all of the effort and time we'd spent cleaning and decorating our house might be seen and appreciated before our two little angels of chaos and destruction undid it all in a matter of minutes. Sure enough, within half an hour of my mother's appearance, our small Christmas tree had been toppled over, baby Jesus was missing from our manger scene (later to be discovered floating in the toilet), and my youngest had managed to bite off Mary's head (another figure in our ill-fated crèche).

Certainly small children are blessings as they enrich our lives in countless ways and give parents a profound sense of purpose. Sometimes, however, such abundance can seem overwhelming. I've come to think of parenting toddlers as a Sisyphean task. No matter how many times you pick up all the

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toys and books and put them away, they will always reappear again all over the floor (often within a matter of minutes). In the midst of raising small children, it is not always possible to reduce the clutter or commotion in your daily life.

Rather than trying to attain the unattainable, I am instead

learning to embrace the blessings that my current reality holds. To find the holiness in all the mess and the constant cacophony of little voices. To feel gratitude for little sticky fingers that reach up to grasp my hand (or my clean shirt) and for small heads that nod off to sleep in my lap. To have my own sense of sacred awe rekindled by witnessing my one-year-old's endless curiosity and delight in the seemingly mundane. Just yesterday, she

was completely enthralled watching several birds fly around our backyard. The miracle of flight is amazing.

Such abundance can also serve as a guide, helping me to discern what really matters and what does not. It is in the small moments of my day – curled up with both my girls reading a book, or watching them build a tower out of blocks – that I often feel God's presence the strongest. Completely ordinary occurrences and yet also divine.

I've lived through enough chapters of my life to learn that abundance comes in many forms. Even though I subsisted on a shoestring budget during my early and mid-twenties, I enjoyed an abundance of free time and friends. Now as a wife and mother in my thirties, I have an abundance of household responsibilities but also a deep and abiding sense of fulfillment at the end of most days. I do not know what future decades will bring but trust that God will provide abundantly what I most need at that time. *R*



Mary Carolyn Watson is a writer and stay-at-home mother. She lives in San Antonio with her husband and two daughters, where they attend St. Mark's Episcopal Church. Reach her at marycarolynwatson@gmail.com




Go Deeper

Questions for Study and Reflection

1. Whether or not you have small children in your life just now, what are the small blessings you are privileged to enjoy every day?
2. What helps you to discern what really matters in your life and what does not?

For a one-hour study:

 Begin your group session with one or two readings from Scripture or prayers from The Book of Common Prayer. See especially A General Thanksgiving or A Litany of Thanksgiving on pg 836 of the BCP. Or use an appropriate selection based on the time of day from Daily Devotions for Individuals and Families, pg 136 BCP. Use other scriptures or psalms as you desire.

Choose one article from this issue, be sure all participants have copies, and give 30 minutes for individuals to read it on their own. If possible, send them out onto the grounds to do the reading.

Gather the group together and invite response to the questions at the end of the article. Or make up your own questions. Or invite the group to add their own questions. The point here is not to answer the questions or to come to consensus, but to explore the topic of abundance as it relates to your community or to individuals.

More Questions:

 Where else in the gospels do we see stories of God's lavish abundance?

Where do we see stories when God's abundance is rejected? (See Mark 10:17-27 for instance.)

Are you a hoarder? Not just of your material goods, but of your time, your love, your attention?

What gifts have you been given you are called to share: The wisdom of years and experience? The story of your transformation? Insights because of your age, gender, or circumstances?

Many Americans voluntarily accept a simplified lifestyle by making conscious choices to leave materialism behind and move on to a more sustainable lifestyle. Is this a good thing whether or not it recognizes God as the giver of all?

Add your own questions:

Other topics related to abundance that your group might explore:



● **The Prosperity Gospel**

“When I was a kid I could tell the difference between neighborhood kids who wanted to be my friend from the neighborhood kids who were my friends so that they could play with my toys,” says Pastor Rick Henderson in the April 24, 2015 edition of Huffington Post Religion. (Link below.) That is the most common criticism of the prosperity gospel – that adherents want God’s things more than they want God. What do you think about the Prosperity Gospel? Is it drawing people to Christ in ways other theologies are not? Is it scriptural? Does it miss the mark in some way?

http://www.huffingtonpost.com/pastor-rick-henderson/osteen-meyer-prosperity-gospel_b_3790384.html



● **Attracting Abundance**

Google the word “abundance” and you will find not Christ’s word in John 10:10 but book after book on how we can attract abundance to ourselves by changing our attitudes (or energy flow). On the upside, say the authors, this abundance can provide for every man, woman, and child on the planet. What do you think about this? Is it up to us to save ourselves and the world? Does God play any part in it?



● **Abundance in Nature**

With our wet spring, South Texas is blooming. A drive along IH 35 or IH 10 is graced with an abundance of Texas wildflowers. If you want to be immersed in abundance, nature does not disappoint. Get out in it. The website Spirituality and Practice offers a 40-day e-course in Practicing Spirituality in Nature that was offered originally in 2009 but is still available.

<http://www.spiritualityandpractice.com/ecourses/combo.php?id=14>

Or visit the Bishop Jones Center in San Antonio and take the Meditation Walk. It is an eight-stop walk around the beautiful grounds of the Jones Center of guided meditations using downloadable audio recordings. Go to it at the link below. You will need a smart phone that connects to the Internet to access the files. Note that the app mentioned is no longer available.

<http://www.dwtx.org/about-the-diocese/cathedral-park-meditation-walk/>

Or just go sit in nature. Take the dog.



What else does Scripture say about abundance?



This list is from a search on the keyword "abundance" at BibleGateway, www.biblegateway.com. This search was limited to New Testament and Psalms.

Do your own search on other Bible sites such as Oremus Bible Browser, <http://bible.oremus.org/> Think of other terms that relate to "abundance" such as "plenty."

All scripture from New Revised Standard Version (NRSV)

Matthew 12:34

You brood of vipers! How can you speak good things, when you are evil? For out of the **abundance of the heart** the mouth speaks.

Matthew 13:12

For to those who have, more will be given, and they **will have an abundance**; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away.

Luke 6:45

The good person out of the good treasure of the heart produces good, and the evil person out of evil treasure produces evil; for it is out of the **abundance of the heart** that the mouth speaks.

Luke 12:15

And he said to them, "Take care! Be on your guard against all kinds of greed; for one's life does not consist in the **abundance of possessions.**"

Luke 21:4

For all of them have contributed **out of their abundance**, but she out of her poverty has put in all she had to live on.

Romans 5:17

If, because of the one man's trespass, death exercised dominion through that one, much more surely will those who receive the **abundance of grace** and the free gift of righteousness exercise dominion in life through the one man, Jesus Christ.

2 Corinthians 8:13-14

I do not mean that there should be relief for others and pressure on you, but it is a question of

a fair balance between your **present abundance** and their need, so that their abundance may be for your need, in order that there may be a fair balance.

2 Corinthians 9:8

And God is able to provide you with every **blessing in abundance**, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.

1 Peter 1:2

To those who have been chosen and destined by God the Father and sanctified by the Spirit to be obedient to Jesus Christ and to be sprinkled with his blood: May grace and peace **be yours in abundance.**

2 Peter 1:2

May grace and peace **be yours in abundance** in the knowledge of God and of Jesus our Lord.

Psalms 36:8

They **feast on the abundance** of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights.

Psalms 37:16

Better is a little that the righteous person has than the **abundance of many wicked.**

Psalms 37:19

They are not put to shame in evil times, in the days of famine **they have abundance.**

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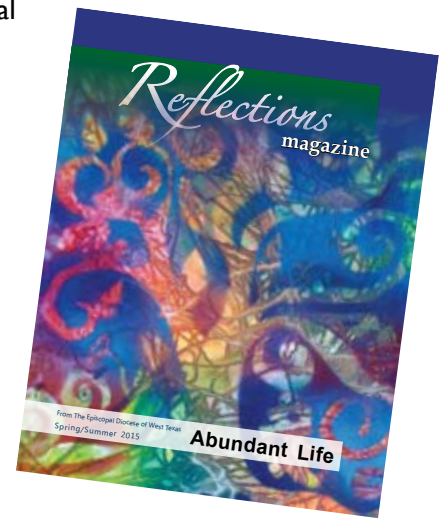
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Called to Serve* meets Abundance

The Presiding Bishop of the Episcopal Church, the Most Rev. Katharine Jefferts Schori, visited the annual council of the Diocese of West Texas in February 2015. In her address to a luncheon during council, the bishop found that serving leads the way to recognizing abundance. Read the text of her address at www.reflections-dwtx.org.

*The diocesan theme for 2015.



Whose Money Is It?

Is it lawful to pay taxes to the emperor, or not? Who owns my money - God or the government? That was the (trick) question the Pharisees asked Jesus in Matthew 22:15-22. The Rev. Mike Marsh, rector of St. Philip's Episcopal Church in Uvalde TX, takes on that conundrum on his blog. Read it here. (from *Interrupting the Silence* Oct. 21, 2014).

<http://interruptingthesilence.com/2014/10/21/is-it-gods-or-the-emperors-a-sermon-on-matthew-2215-22/>



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