

SLD08.07.05 19th Ordinary
EPC
Luke 11:33-36, 37-41, 42-44,13:10-17, 22-30, 34-35
from Clarence Jordan's Cotton Patch Gospel
Jill Oglesby Evans

“Yours in Faith and Expectation – Clarence Jordan”

That was a number of different, and occasionally unrelated, scripture passages that Betty and I just read, not from the New Revised Standard Version of the Bible we're accustomed to hearing each Sunday morning, but from Clarence Jordan's Cotton Patch Version of the Gospel of Luke, published in 1968. I wanted you to hear a number of different passages from Jordan's Cotton Patch Version so you'd get a feel for his style, his license, his setting, his vernacular – all so clearly grounded in rural, agricultural Georgia, which is where Jordan was born.

Now I believe Jordan actually pronounced his name “Jer'din,” which is hard for me to remember but I'll do my best. For I proposed to introduce Clarence Jerdan to you as our ‘saint of the week’ this week. If you're a visitor, you may not know that you've landed smack in the middle of a series of sermons on the saints of the Christian tradition. It's what I like to do during the summertime, when our lectionary leads us to focus on the challenges and possibilities of the Christian life. And between this summer and last, we've covered quite a handful of holy ones here at Emory Church. But since so many of them hailed from the Middle Ages, I thought last week and this, I'd choose some more contemporary models of the radical Christian life. Which is how I happened to land on Clarence Jerdan - scholar, idealist, activist, and cotton farmer - a modern-day piece of Christian work, sure enough.¹

¹ Much of my material for this sermon came from various articles about Jordan and Koinonia on Koinonia's website www.koinoniapartners.org.

Born in rural Georgia in 1912, Jerdan studied agriculture at the University of Georgia before attending Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville. Hewn from the massive Baptist denomination known primarily for its conformity to culture, Jerdan was a genuine product of the Bible Belt, of the rural, agrarian heartland, of the people's church. But unlike his colleagues and fellow faithful, Jerdan's perpetual stress was on the anti-cultural, Christ-transcending and Christ-transforming aspects of the gospel.

Jerdan pursued his faith tradition to its very academic end, ending up with a Ph.D. in the Greek New Testament from Southern Baptist Theological Seminary in Louisville, Kentucky. And then, a worn-out Greek version of the Gospels ever in his hand, Jerdan proceeded to press his evangelical, Bible-centered tradition to its limit, uncovering for his hearers the radical ethic of Christianity and his simple conviction that the values of God's reign were meant to be lived out here and now. And he was not inclined to pull any punches.

The story is told that after one sermon before a southern congregation, an elderly woman approached Clarence and said, "I want you to know that my granddaddy fought in the Civil War, and I'll never believe a word you say." Returning her steely glare with a gracious smile, Jerdan replied, "Ma'am, your choice seem quite clear. It is whether you will follow your granddaddy or Jesus Christ."²

² Robert Ellsberg, All Saints, Daily Reflections on Saints, Prophets and Witnesses For Our Time, The Crossroads Publishing Company, New York, 1999, p. 470.

Quote 1

I was a freshman at a small women's college in Georgia in 1941. One day Clarence Jordan spoke. During that hour I experienced the greatest learning experience of my life. It was a true conversion experience. All the contradictions of being southern, Christian, white, educated, and a woman confronted me. I was spellbound and fascinated, but my mind was on fire. For the first time it all made sense, and the message and mission for a Christian in the South was clear. I could never again be so complacent, or sit still, or be quiet in the face of oppression or injustice.

Helen Lewis, Highlander Center, New Market Tennessee

Quote 2

It was January, 1969, before I left my job as a business executive. As I thought about being with Clarence for a few hours, I felt a lot of joy and more than a little apprehension. With La Guardia airport's snarl of traffic behind us, I plunged into conversation. "You know, Clarence, I've been thinking a lot about the kind of discipleship you taught us last August, and I'm really troubled. My life is so complicated today. Sure wish things were as simple as leaving your nets." "Awe, I dunno, Ladon," Clarence drawled, "I'd guess old Rock and Andy (that's what he called Peter and Andrew) ...I'd guess old Rock and Andy found it as hard to leave their jobs as you would to leave IBM." Rationalizations unmasked, I glanced over. We exchanged grins, and I changed the subject.

Laden Sheats, Baltimore, Maryland

As far as Jordan was concerned, in the local church, everybody was equal: young and old, black and white, male and female, rich and poor, learned and unlearned. The division between clergy and laity, between ordained and unordained, between work and worship, he was forever reminding his community, appear neither in the church's tradition nor in the Scriptures honored as the sole guide of faith and practice.

Quote 3

Clarence was speaking with a pastor once, and the pastor was bemoaning the fact that he couldn't get his deacons to give any more money for the janitor's salary. So Clarence asked, "How many children does your janitor have?"

The minister replied, "Eight."

"And how many do you have?"

The minister responded, "Four."

Clarence continued, "Do you make more money than the janitor?"

"Yes"

"I can solve your problem. You swap salaries with the janitor."

What Clarence Jerdan did was to take theology and ecclesiology and scholarly Bible study from the classroom and carry it to the people. His theology was that of the working class, the farm worker, the most neglected laborer in the United States. Jerdan himself was a farm worker, a man of both soul and soil, who wore his dirty overalls with pride. So when it came to talking about the discipleship of a follower of Jesus Christ, he didn't mess around with fancy words or vague philosophizing; he simply told the truth: if you're a Christian, your life's on the line.

Quote 4

Discipleship, in Clarence's mind, was not another command upon an always reluctant believer. It was the inevitable consequence of the inner conviction that Jesus is Lord. Clarence's life was shaped by the Scriptures. It's always refreshing, in a day when small groups and pop psychology parade as koinonia and gospel, to hear a scholar at work in biblical exegesis. Clarence wrapped the Word in the overalls of a southern preacher and taught us about another kind of Bible translator -- the kind that can get a man shot at and lynched in a hundred ways. I shall be forever grateful that God led me to Clarence Jordan. From him I learned something about Christian integrity--living your insides out.

William Pannell, Fuller Theological Seminary

Jerdan worked through his ideas in his books, the "Cotton Patch" versions of the New Testament gospels, epistles, and the Sermon on the Mount, declaring, "Scriptures should be taken out of the classroom and the stained-glass sanctuary and put out under God's skies where people are toiling and crying and wondering. That's where the mighty events of the good news *first* happened, and that alone is where they feel at home."

As far as Jerdan was concerned, the whole *thrust* of Christianity was Christ incarnate in *koinonia*, the Greek word for 'community.' And not just any old community, but a community of Christ-imitators. And to Jerdan, imitating Christ meant going the second mile, giving the extra coat, settling matters outside the law, living peacefully with everyone. "Faith is the turning of dreams into deeds" – that was how Jordan translated Hebrews 1:11. "Faith is the turning of dreams into deeds."

And I'm talking about a man who practiced what he preached. In 1942, in order to turn their *own* faith in to deeds, Clarence and Florence Jordan and Mabel and Martin England moved to Sumter County near Americus, Georgia, and founded Koinonia Farm. Their goal was nothing short of living out the teachings of Jesus amidst the poverty and racism of the rural South. The two couples envisioned forming an interracial community where blacks and whites could live and work together in a spirit of partnership. And they boiled down their radical call to discipleship to four simple principles.

Well, they sound simple but when you hear them you'll recognize some of the most challenging principles of human existence. Here they are:

1. Treat all human beings with dignity and justice
2. Choose love over violence.
3. Share all possessions and live simply.
4. Be stewards of the land and its natural resources.

Living by these principles, the Koinonia community grew and friendships formed as the Jerdans and the Englands and their neighbors ate meals, attended Bible studies, put on summer youth camps, and farmed together.

Quote 5

Koinonia was one of the few places in the South where social equality could be experienced. It took understanding of how people are transformed as well as personal courage to provide a place where equality could be practiced, especially at a time when most professed believers felt that it was more practical to theorize, research, and discuss the matter.

Myles Horton, Highlander Center, New Market, Tennessee

Throughout the 1950s and early 60s, Koinonia remained a witness to nonviolence and racial equality, *but not without serious consequences*. Because of their radical witness, the members of Koinonia withstood firebombs, bullets, KKK rallies, death threats, property damage, excommunication from churches, and economic boycotts.

Quote 6

Some of us went down to Koinonia because we got word that their smokehouses had been dynamited and their gasoline pumps, punctured with high powered rifles. The buildings had been riddled during the night with machine guns using tracer bullets, and some of the children playing volleyball at dusk had been fired on from passing automobiles, the pellets raining about them like summer hailstones.

Will Campbell, Sojourners Magazine

Indeed, in the mid 20th century – we're talking just 40 years ago here in Georgia – Koinonia farm was so harassed by shootings, burnings, bombings, and beatings, that little could be produced and marketed. And because of the local boycott, few seeds and little fertilizer or fuel could be purchased. When no sales could be made, thousands of the chickens had to be slaughtered wastefully. The farm's roadside store, after being fired upon and dynamited, was burned to the ground. More than 300 of Koinonia's pecan trees were chopped down. In fact, the economic boycott of the community was so vigorously enforced that the only way the Farm managed to hold on was by developing a mail-order business in pecans.

Beyond property damage, attempts were made on the lives of those at Koinonia. On May 26, 1957, members of the Sumter County Chamber of Commerce called upon the community and begged them to leave the county. In response, Jerdan preached his memorable sermon called "The Substance of Faith," in which he declared that **"God is not in his heaven with all well on the earth. (God) is on this earth, and all hell's broken loose."**

Quote 7

Clarence had a lot of courage. He could look you right in the eye and tell you what he thought. He once walked into a large house and said, "Nice piece of plunder you got here." But he always had reconciliation in mind. When a lot of us young whippersnappers moved down here, division was on our minds. The more we could distinguish ourselves from the racists here, the better we felt about ourselves. But Clarence's example showed us the importance of reuniting.

Ted Swisher, former director of Koinonia, now Director of US Affiliates at Habitat for Humanity International

Throughout the challenging experiment of Koinonia Farm, Clarence and his family lived by deliberate choice in the same over-the-kitchen apartment, never opting

to move to new or more commodious living quarters, never asking for special favors.

Unlike the saints of old who so often took religious vows, including celibacy, Clarence, Florence, and his children went through their entire witness together.

But by the time 1968 rolled around, Koinonia found itself at a crossroads. Local violence had tapered off, and now only two families were living on the farm, including the Jerdans. Clarence had begun to devote more of his time to his Cotton Patch translations and the community found itself searching for a renewed focus, unsure whether perhaps the end of Koinonia's witness had come.

Quote 8

from a personal letter of Jerdan's to Friends of Koinonia:

An integrated, Christian community was a very practical vehicle through which to bear witness to a segregated society a decade ago, but now it is too slow, too weak, not aggressive enough. Its lack of mobility gives it the appearance of a house on the bank of a river as the rushing torrents of history swirl by, leaving it with but memories of its active past. Other factors, which cannot be mentioned here, also contributed to the feeling that this approach is no longer valid.

One day during this uncertain period Jerdan received a brief note from Millard Fuller that said, "I have just resigned my job. What do you have up your sleeve?" Millard and Linda Fuller had spent a month at Koinonia several years earlier, shortly after the threat of a failed marriage had caused the couple to recommit their lives to God and give away their wealth. Millard had been a millionaire businessman, and his enthusiasm injected a new spirit of energy into Jerdan.

And sure enough, after a series of meetings with Millard and other friends of Koinonia, a new direction for the community emerged. Changing its name from Koinonia Farm, to Koinonia Partners, the community launched several innovative "partnership" programs, chief among them "Partnership Housing," which sought to build affordable homes for low-income

families living in shacks and dilapidated houses. Using volunteer labor and donations, Koinonia built 194 homes from 1969 to 1992, which families bought with 20-year, no-interest mortgages. Mortgage payments were placed in a revolving Fund for Humanity, which was then used to build more houses.

Quote 9

A quote from Jerdan's fundraising letter for Partnership Housing:

I would like to encourage each of you to rethink your life and make whatever adjustments you feel necessary to bring it into line with the will of God. Augustine once said, "He who possesses a surplus possesses the goods of others." That's a polite way of saying that anybody who has too much is a thief. If you are a "thief", perhaps you should set a reasonable living standard for your family and restore the "stolen goods" to humanity, either through the Fund or by some other suitable means. Some of you may wish to join us and seek the new life or partnership with God and man. Above all, I beg you to pray that we may have the wisdom, humility, patience and love to be faithful to him who has called us to this exciting venture. And may God's peace rule in your hearts.

Yours in faith and expectation,

Clarence Jerdan

With both rich and poor contributing capital to the Fund and building houses together, Clarence saw his vision of Partnership become a reality. Of the homes built, 62 houses sit on Koinonia's land, forming two neighborhoods that surround the central community area; the remaining houses are located in the towns of Americus and Plains. Although Clarence died in 1969 just before the first house was completed, his vision continued. The Fullers remained at the Farm, guiding the first 4 years of Koinonia's partnership housing program before moving to Africa for 3 years to establish a similar program abroad.

In 1976, the Fullers returned to Americus and founded an enterprise familiar to us all – **Habitat for Humanity** – now a worldwide housing ministry with affiliates in every state and in more than 50 countries, and one in which this church has participated for years. Modeled

after Koinonia's original "Partnership Housing" program, Habitat builds houses with and for families in need, and then sells the houses to the families at no profit and no interest. To date, Habitat for Humanity volunteers and homeowners have built more than 100,000 houses around the world.

Writing about Clarence Jordan after he died, Joyce Hollyday of Sojourners Magazine remarked that Jordan "had given up his life to God, and thus lived with the knowledge that no one could take his life from him. He understood deeply the connection between life and death, the impossibility of sharing resurrection without participating in crucifixion. And so he endured excommunication from his church and gunfire from nightriders, living as a man who knew that local hatred and the Ku Klux Klan had no more power over his life than Pilate did over Christ's."³

At the notion of being labeled a saint, I have no doubt but that Clarence Jordan would laugh out loud; a big, deep belly-rumbler. But at the notion that every Christian should lay down their life as Christ did? Why, for Jordan, that was just the *first* step of entering that "door of all-out commitment," through which, in his view, each and every one of us is called.

To the glory of God. Amen.

³ Joyce Hollyday, © Sojourners, December 1979, Vol 8, no 12.