

## Living Abundance

Part 1 of 4 in the Stewardship series, *What Gift Can We Bring?*  
Ephesians 3:14-21, John 6:1-21 – October 10, 2010 – Browns Point UMC  
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I've been in church long enough to know that when the pastor says the dreaded words, "Stewardship Campaign," it often translates in parishioner's minds as "a good time to stay home and work on those projects I've been meaning to do." No one wants to be guilted into making a pledge they can't afford and don't want to make; it's embarrassing for the pastor to get up and tell you how we might not make it if you don't step up your giving; and we all feel a wee bit uncomfortable talking about money in public, anyway. It's a strange thing for me, too, to talk about money like this. After all, much of what I know in life, I learned during sorority recruitment, when the five forbidden conversation subjects were boys, politics, booze, religion, and, of course, money.

But here we are, at that time of the year again, when we start thinking about budgets, and will be making New Year's resolutions before we know it. And, since Jesus talked about money more than just about anything, it's appropriate that we talk about it, too. I will say, though, that over the next four weeks I have no intention of guilting you into anything, I promise not to imply that the church will go under if you don't step up your giving to 10% of your gross income, and I'll try to make the money talk as palatable as possible. Money, as little as we'd like to admit it, is a *huge* part of our lives, after all. We can't do ministry without at least a little of it, and few of us go more than a few hours without making it, spending it, or at least thinking about it.

But as I prepared this week to preach to you today, hoping to lecture you on living with the perspective of abundance rather than scarcity, I noticed that this text from Ephesians is a prayer by Paul for the church he has led, a prayer for the way they will live as Christians. And we're taught in seminary preaching class to let the text be the guide – to preach what the Bible gives you. And so this morning I offer you not the lecture I had intended, but *my* prayer for the church I lead. That's you. And this is my prayer:

I bow my knees to the God of all creation, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name, and I pray for you. I pray for you every day, every morning when I wake up, every night when I go to sleep, every time I drive up the driveway or walk through the doors. I pray that you will be well. I pray for your relationships with each other and with your families, that God would bind up any broken places between you. I pray that you would feel God's love in every part of your lives, and that that love would draw you even more into commitment to this church. I pray discernment for you, that you would know exactly what God has in store – what is the next step God would have you take on whatever journey you're on – and that you would have the courage every day to go one more step, and then another.

But more than all these things, I pray that you believe, not in your heads, but in your hearts, in your whole beings. Believe in God, yes, and all the facets of the creeds – that God created heaven and earth, you and me; that God's only son walked on the earth, died on a cross, and was raised from the dead; that love wins in the end, and we all get to be a part of it. But I pray that you believe beyond the creeds: I pray that you believe in God within you, within our congregation. You see, it's only when we truly invite Christ to dwell within us that we can even begin to fathom the breadth and length and height and depth of God's grace, the love which is beyond the capacity of our imaginations, and so I pray that you invite God to dwell within you – that you offer more than your spare room or the occasional meal, but you ask God to move in and stay, even though you know

there will be discomfort, and challenges, and awkwardness and maybe even arguments. God won't do everything like you would have done, and you will sometimes resent that. But I pray you'll stick with it, recognizing how much richer your life is as Christ transforms you; how much more beautiful the world is when you see it with God's eyes.

I know that you are smart, that you are sophisticated. You have traveled the world, managed corporations, raised children. It would be easy for you to think you don't need anyone else – that you can do life without help. But I pray you'll quickly discover that this is a mistake: that you are hungry for the bread of life, and there's only one place to get it.

And the best news is that there is plenty. There's enough. I know the world is trying to convince you that everything is running out and you should grab as much as you can, because you aren't enough, and you don't have enough, and you'll never be enough, without buying and consuming and hoarding; but God has another idea, and it's called abundance. I know times are tough and it's hard to think in those terms, but we're all being called to live abundance – to live with the living, incarnate, abundance who is Christ Jesus within us – to live lives that are living symbols of the Jewish Passover prayer called the 'deyanu,' always saying, "It would have been enough, O God." It would have been enough if you had just created this incredible world, but to allow us eyes and ears and fingers and taste buds and noses to experience it... it would have been enough for you to save us, but this overwhelming outpouring of grace... it would have been enough for you to call us into community, but to send the Holy Spirit as our advocate, always residing in our midst, closer than the breath we breathe... I pray that your lives are prayers of gratitude for such abundant gifts of grace.

Abundance can be tough, I know – we're living in a world where there seems to be an abundance of pain, there's so much doubt and hurt and injustice, and with constant information being streamed toward us, it's easy to see the problems of the world and just shut down. It would be easy for us to say, with Philip, "six months wages would not buy enough..." or with Andrew, "But what are these five loaves and two fishes among so many people?" It would be easy for us to approach the hungry crowds and be overwhelmed and shut down and walk away. It would be easy to say, "We're just a little church, and we've been through so much, let's just take a break;" for the finance team to say, "That's not in our budget;" or for the Mission team to say, "We don't have enough volunteers;" or for the trustees to say, "This many people might ruin the new carpet." "Surely you don't expect us to feed them all today. There are bigger churches, there are other organizations – let them help. We don't have enough."

It would be easy for you to serve out of a sense of duty, or a desire to contribute to something larger than yourself. It would be easy for us to go on and on, surviving and even moderately growing as a congregation, being careful, contributing, staying comfortable, being reasonable. **But my prayer for you is that you would want more:** that you would expect, each day, to participate in a miracle. I pray that you would see our work together not as the necessary measure for the survival of an institution but as a venue for God's glory to break forth in the world. I pray that you would see our ministry not as the gathering of like-minded people to meet basic needs for community and moral growth and service to others, but as a chance to reveal the boundless grace of God to the world.

Maybe we haven't seen miracles here like those in Capernaum saw that day with Jesus, maybe our bread hasn't been multiplied or our water walked on. But there are miracles happening here every day, and I pray that you have eyes to see: that a truly human Jesus might bring hope and healing to the world – *that* is a miracle; that all these people might follow him, suddenly recognizing their hunger for the bread of life and being satisfied – *that* is a miracle; that one man's presence

could calm anxieties and bring people to walk where they once feared – *that* is a miracle; that all of us are welcome to a feast none of us deserves. Miracle.<sup>1</sup>

Elizabeth Barrett Browning said in her poem, *Aurora Leigh*,

“Earth’s crammed with heaven,  
And every common bush afire with God;  
And only he who sees takes off his shoes—  
The rest sit round it and pick blackberries.”

I pray, dear friends, that you would see the fire of God all around you – and indeed within you, within each other – so that this world of scarcity would become radiant, throbbing with possibility. And in that fire, I pray that you would find power. Power to work, to love and to heal and to serve, yes. But power, also to understand – just to begin to understand – the boundless love of Christ.

Paul said to the Ephesians that “God, by the power at work within us, is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.” God can do more than we can even dream if we will trust God’s power and live as God’s people – not the people of the world, who are so desperate to convince us that there will never be enough. God *can* multiply loaves and fish. God *can* walk on water. God *can* heal the sick and even raise the dead. Because with God, “not enough” is never the final answer. With our God, there is *always* enough, enough for *everyone*, with love overflowing so that there are baskets upon baskets left over. God can take a piece of bread and satisfy our deepest hunger; God can give a sip of wine and make us thirsty no more. God can take a group of sophisticated, smart, well-traveled, accomplished suburbanites and transform them into an incarnate community that *lives* the Gospel, trusting, believing, that love really wins and the world *can be* transformed. I pray that you would be that community, my friends. I pray that you would live abundance, expecting miracles, so overflowing with God’s love that “not enough” will never be the final answer, and everything you do would be a revelation to the world of the abundance of God’s amazing grace.

Amen.

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<sup>1</sup> This idea stems from Douglas John Hall’s exposition of John 6:1-21 in *Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3*, David L. Bartlett and Barbara Brown Taylor, general editors. (Louisville: Westminster John Knox, 2009), 288.