

Sermon “Abundance”
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Olivet Congregational Church, UCC
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SCRIPTURE

2 KINGS 4: 42-44

A man came from Baal-shalishah, bringing food from the first fruits to the man of God: twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. Elisha said, ‘Give it to the people and let them eat.’ But his servant said, ‘How can I set this before a hundred people?’ So he repeated, ‘Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the LORD, “They shall eat and have some left.” ’ He set it before them, they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the LORD.

Ephesians 3: 14-21

For this reason I bow my knees before the Father, from whom every family in heaven and on earth takes its name. I pray that, according to the riches of his glory, he may grant that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit, and that Christ may dwell in your hearts through faith, as you are being rooted and grounded in love. I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that surpasses knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the fullness of God.

Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, for ever and ever. Amen.

SERMON “Abundance”

I’ve learned that we at Olivet are really good at pot luck meals. But have you ever experienced anxiety when coordinating a pot luck meal? You ask people to sign up with what they will bring and inevitably someone writes “something” or maybe jots a question mark on the sign up list. Or a person or maybe even a few

people call you the day of the gathering to say they want to come but will not have time to bring a dish. So you say, "Of course you can come, there will be plenty of food" but later you fret over your words as you worry that there will not be enough. And when the time for the potluck comes, you have lots of food. There may be more salads or desserts than you had wished, but everyone is fed and the gathering is a great success.

So why did you worry? Well for some reason we worry that there will not be enough. Perhaps it is because we think in terms of scarcity rather than in terms of abundance.

Well today, we hear about abundance. Our psalm speaks of the abundance. The psalmist reminds us of God's abundant goodness and that God abounds in steadfast love. Our God is a God of abundance.

In our reading from 2 Kings, what appears to be too small an amount ends up being more than enough for Elisha to feed a multitude of people. Now, ahead of this passage, Elisha had been performing miracles. He had called upon God to bless an elderly woman, who had provided him with hospitality, and her elderly husband with a child. And when that child became ill and died, Elisha brought him back to life.

In this morning's passage we hear that a man from Baal-shalishah came to Elisha with 20 loaves of barley bread and other grain. We hear that the stranger brought the first fruits of his harvest – the first fruits, not what remained after the crop was picked over, but the early harvest, and fresh bread. Perhaps this man felt blessed that he felt he needed to share his bread and ears of grain. So he brought them to Elisha. We don't know why he went to Elisha or why he decided to present this offering to Elisha at that time, on that day. But he was apparently in the right place at the right time.

Elisha could certainly use that man's offering. He had 100 people to feed. He also had faith that God would provide - in abundance. Over the protest and disbelief of his servant, that 20 loaves of bread and some grain could feed 100 people, Elisha told his servant to give the bread to those present – because the Lord said, "They shall eat and have some left over." So the people ate. And there were left overs.

Elisha had faith in his God. He did not operate within the context of scarcity. He believed that God would provide. He believed in the abundant blessing of God –

enough to meet what was needed with more left over. Abundance, more than enough, more than we need. Elisha's God, our God, works in abundance.

In Paul's letter to the church at Ephesus, Paul speaks of abundance. He hopes that those early Christians will be able to grasp the breadth, length, height, and depth of God's love. The abundance of God's love. Now I don't know about you, but I think that's a pretty tall order - that those early Christians, or we, might truly grasp the abundance of God's love.... Do you think we can ever truly do that?

Well, Paul prays that the early Christians in Ephesus will understand the height and length and depth and breadth of God's love. He prays this because, as he points out that God has given all families their name – God is father of all people Jews and Gentiles alike. God's love is for all and is beyond measure. He wants the people to understand that God's love is for all people. All.

Well, I think it's be beyond our human capacity to understand the capacity of God's love. I don't know that we can truly understand the love that God has for us and for everyone. You might even say it is beyond our wildest dreams.

But that is what faith is about because the love of God is beyond what we can understand with our brain. That's why we have faith. Faith is being able to hold in our hearts what is beyond what we can grasp with our minds. Paul desires that Christ may dwell in our hearts through faith – so that we are grounded and rooted in love.

Paul goes on to say that once we live with the unconditional love of Christ in our hearts, we can do more than we can ever imagine. Paul tells us that when we are filled with the fullness of God, with the power of God at work within us, we can “accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.” God can use us in ways we don't even realize. With the power of God within us, our actions can yield abundant results. If we have the love of Christ, that unconditional love for all people, in our hearts, who knows what will happen.

God's abundant love. With it we are able to accomplish abundantly more than we can on our own. Perhaps that's partly why we come together to worship God, in community. Together we are reminded of God's love. Together, we, like early Christians, know that when we worship together, when we give thanks for the abundant blessings we have received, we glorify God. Together we glorify God.

In her book, Grateful, Diana Butler Bass shares the story of her daughter's high school graduation. She leads into that story by sharing that their town, and thus the student body, was ethnically and racially diverse. She even included that, according to government statistics, 38% of the students were "economically disadvantaged." Since it was the first time she and her husband had attended a school-wide event, she had not previously noticed the diversity of students nor the diversity of languages that were spoken.

As the graduation began, she realized that it was not like her own graduation which was a well-ordered event. She compared this graduation to a World Cup soccer event with its huge roars erupting from the crowd as the students entered. And as names were called, there was no respectful silence where parents and families waited as directed until the end to applaud. "Instead, families hooted and whistled, waved banners and made a ruckus of praise for their son or daughter." (p. 95) While she was initially uncomfortable with the noise level and the lack of adherence to protocol, her husband pointed out that these students were likely the first in their families to graduate. "Those families were grateful. She stated, "As I watched all these new Americans rejoice, my soul moved from discomfort to appreciation." And amidst the spontaneous joy of the occasion, she heard, " 'What a great day'!... 'Thank you, Jesus!'... 'Thank you, Mom and Dad!'"

There was an abundance of joy and gratitude. An Abundance. Of Gratitude. An Exuberant Abundance.

Diana Butler Bass shared another story, a quiet story of abundance; an abundance of simple gifts resulting in an abundance of gratitude. It's the story of a young pastor, a father of young children, who was preaching for the first time in over a year. He had been receiving treatment for an incurable cancer, and would continue to need chemo every few months for the rest of his life. Well, that young pastor shared his gratitude for all his congregation had done for him while he was undergoing treatment. He shared that they had prayed for and with him, brought his family meals, helped with medical bills and visited him while he was in the hospital. He said, "You were there to catch me when I passed out in the chemo room and you didn't bat an eye when I puked in your car." (p. 98)

This young pastor admitted that he did not like being indebted to people. But rather than indebtedness, he felt gratitude. He learned that gratitude is not about keeping score. Rather gratitude is about relationship. Bass explained that he

“discovered that courage and hope could not be summoned magically; rather, strength and healing came through community.” (p. 98) He was grateful for his congregation, of their being present to him and his family saying, “We can endure all things because you’ve been with us. You’re with us. More so than all the stuff you’ve done for us, you’ve been with us.” (p. 99)

And as a community of faith, we try to go forth and bring God’s glory to our world. And when we work together, as faith communities, sharing our common belief that we are to love God and our neighbor, with God’s guidance we can accomplish more than we can on our own. Maybe we pray. Maybe we offer a smile when someone looks sad. Maybe we make a phone call. Maybe we sit quietly. Maybe we bring a casserole or a cake. Maybe we drive someone somewhere or buy them groceries. Think of it as a faith pot luck supper – each person brings his or her own gifts, his or her own prayers, his or her own traditions to the table of life- to the service of another. When each person shares what is a part of him or her – a recipe, a talent, their time or their presence, there is abundance.

Elisha reminds us that when we trust in our God, our gifts will be multiplied. And when our gifts are multiplied, others are fed. Others benefit from our gifts. Love grows.

Paul reminds us that when Christ dwells in our hearts through faith, and we are grounded in love. Then we can begin to comprehend the breadth and length and height and depth of God’s love for all people and that the love of God surpasses human knowledge. God’s love for all people is beyond our wildest dreams. We are abundantly blessed – not just with houses, cars, food, jobs, families; not just our talent, or time or our treasures. We are abundantly blessed with God’s love. And when we have the power of God’s love working within us, we are able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine.

So as we reflect on our readings this morning, let us recall that our God is a God who deals in abundance – abundance of blessings, abundance of love, and abundant results when we rely on the power of God at work within us. Then let us ask in what ways are we blessed and in what ways are we called to share our blessings. What gifts from God are we called to bring to our world? Even small gifts, shared with others, can yield an abundance of blessings.

