

“God’s Abundance Made Real”

A Sermon prepared for the Nebraska Synod for Sunday July 25, 2021

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Based on the appointed readings from the Revised Common Lectionary for Lectionary 17B, the Ninth Sunday after Pentecost:

John 6:1-21, 2 Kings 4:42-44, Psalm 145:10-18, and Ephesians 3:14-21.

Grace and peace from God in Christ, whose abundant love and abundant life is given freely for you and for me. Amen.

In thinking about our stories of abundance this week, I don’t know where else to start than with gratitude. What can we do but be deeply grateful, and respond joyfully for all that God has done, continues to do, and promises to do, for us? The psalmist gives us words for our joy and thanks. Proclaiming, “All your works shall give thanks to you, O Lord, and all your faithful shall bless you. They shall speak of the glory of your kingdom, and tell of your power, to make known to all people your mighty deeds, and the glorious splendor of your kingdom.”¹

What else can we say, when we remember stories like our first lesson that we hear today when twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain are enough to feed hundreds with food left over? What else can we say, when we remember that with five loaves and two fish, Jesus fed thousands and had twelve baskets full for the people’s journey home afterward? What else can we say, when we remember what our God has done for us and will do for us? But thank you. Praise Jesus. Hallelujah! These stories just call us to stand up for joy. To shout. To sing. To clap our hands. To go and share the good news of our God who is with us, who is for us, and who loves us, always.

The Feeding of the 5,000

Our gospel story needs no introduction. But John's version of this story is interesting. Because within this version of the story, we hear that the feeding of the 5,000 starts as a test of sorts. Jesus knew what he was going to do all along here. He just wanted to see if the disciples like Philip had been paying attention? But of course, who could blame Philip for thinking that feeding thousands would be impossible. Andrew Simon at least paid attention to the possibility of what assets and resources they might have to work with. Though he certainly viewed the five loaves and two fish with an eye of scarcity. That's a very normal human thing to do. Who in their right mind would think five loaves and two fish would feed thousands? Let alone 5,000 people, and have enough for left-overs afterwards? But of course, there was enough. There was more than enough. Twelve baskets or doggy-bags extra of enough.

And it's not like anyone went hungry with a small portion. Because we read that the food that was left over was only collected after all had ate and had "as much as they wanted," and "were satisfied."²

¹ Psalm 145:10-12, NRSV.

² John 6:11-12, NRSV.

Again, the only response to such a miracle and moment of God showing up and doing God's thing could be one of amazement, gratitude, and joy. The disciples were right to be amazed. The crowd was too. But as Jesus has been preaching and was teaching to the crowd that had gathered that day, this was just another way of Jesus showing and teaching about who God is. A God of love. A God of abundance. A God who is enough for you and for me, and because of whom, you and I are enough. We are enough for what God calls us to be a part of- for we are God's beloved, created in God's own image, and whom God loves and walks with always.

The disciples were amazed at what they were witnessing. The crowd was too. Thousands fed. Words of deep meaning taught and preached. The crowds got swept up in wonder. And they began to say, "This is indeed the prophet who has come into the world."³ There's wisdom in that. But there's also the human shortcoming of turning the wisdom into something about power. The crowd's response to what they had witnessed, at least in John's version of the story, is that they wanted to make Jesus king. And well, as we know from the rest of the gospel, that isn't part of God's plan- at least in our earthly conception of what being a king might mean. So, Jesus withdrew.

After feeding thousands, Jesus needs a chance to catch his breath. To take some time in prayer and contemplation. To recharge. To be present. Because life and ministry is hard enough. To be the Son of God, well, thankfully none of us could imagine that kind of weight and vocation. God is God, and we are not. Thanks be to God. But after some time to recharge, the disciples were already out on the water without him. The storms came. But, so did Jesus. Walking on water, saying, "It is I; do not be afraid."⁴ And with that, in just a few verses they reached where they were going. It seems kind of like a passing thought that Jesus walked on water here. I mean, isn't that kind of extraordinary? The disciples thought he was a ghost, but that's all that was mentioned. Given the wordiness of John, you would think this might get more narrative. But it's interesting. It's right after Jesus feeds thousands and then takes a moment to breathe.

In terms of discipleship, this gospel lesson reminds us that God is enough and because God is enough, we are enough. It reminds us and shows us, just what it means that God loves abundantly and provides abundantly. There is more than enough to go around. This isn't some zero-sum game, where there is only so much love. No. Our story also shows us that God walks with us, even on the water. God shows up on the nice sunny days on the green grass like Jesus did and the thousands who gathered to hear him and who ate fish and bread together. And God shows up on the hard nights that come with storms. Storms like that of the floods of a couple years ago. Storms like that of a global pandemic we have all been living through. And storms like those who have traveled across our state this past month with wind, water, lightning, thunder, and hail.

³ John 6:14, NRSV.

⁴ John 6:20, NRSV.

This gospel story and all these stories this week are reminders full of good news. Good news that we do not live alone. We live with God. We are not called to our own work alone, but are called, gathered and sent with God. And for whatever we might be called to be a part of, because God is with us in it, we are and we have enough to meet the challenges of the task. Sometimes that might mean though, that we must put our human notions of what is possible aside, and allow space for the extraordinary or seemingly impossible to emerge. When we do that, we might just witness some pretty amazing things.

Like in our first lesson this week. The bread and grain offered to feed the hundred, is from a person as their “first fruits” offering.⁵ By offering up the bread to be used as needed, the one offering it is returning a portion of what is God's, back to God. This is how abundance works. Especially when we remember that all that we have and all that we are is God's. Thus, we are God's. God can take us, and do amazing things with you and me. God can take a few loaves of bread, and feed thousands. God can turn water into wine. The ordinary can and is extraordinary with and through God, for you and for me.

Ordinary to Extraordinary and a little to a lot

It's kind of what God does, isn't it? God in Christ turns water into wine. God in Christ turns a few loaves and a couple fish into a feast of plenty for thousands. God in Christ, also turns a heart wrenching death on a cross into life abiding and abundant. It's rather incredible and amazing.

In our second lesson this week, the Apostle Paul reminds us again as he writes to the people of Ephesus, who we are and whose we are. He reminds us too, of whose work we are called to be a part of. It is God, through God's own "riches" that strengthens us and through whom Christ dwells in our hearts through faith. This isn't a work. This isn't something we do, or deserve. But it is God who is at work in us. It is the love of Christ that surpasses all our very being which makes this all possible. For it is God who "is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine."⁶ When things seem impossible, God finds a way. When it seems like we're trapped in a certain pattern, or there is a need too great, God finds a way. Sometimes the only thing required to be part of or to witness to God's activity around us, is to get out of our own way and make room for God to act in, around, with, through, and for us.

It's a truth about stewardship and discipleship. It's also a truth about mission and innovation and the church at large. God is up to something. God is always up to something. God might even be doing a new thing for God's beloved right now. The question I would wonder would be, are we looking for it? Are we witnessing to it? Are we making space for God's creative and redeeming work to take hold? Or are we inadvertently creating barriers to it? No matter. Our barriers won't contain God very long, but if there is any way that we can help hasten God's work and get out of our own way so that God's radical love can grow and God's good news can spread through word and deed, we must do it. If this means changing our worship times or experiences, so be it.

⁵ 2 Kings 4:42, NRSV.

⁶ Ephesians 3:20, NRSV.

If it changes the way we gather, like the pandemic did for so long, so be it. If it means, learning to sing or do church differently, so be it.

Because the church isn't called to be stagnant. It's called and created to be the very living Body of Christ. Fed around the table of reconciliation. Washed and claimed in the fount of new life. Called, gathered, and sent in our various vocations to be Christ's hands and feet in the world. Through you, for you, and with you, God is up to something and most likely God is up to something of great abundance.

Mission and Innovation

In our gospel story this week, Andrew Simon at least was paying attention to Jesus' teaching, to know enough to look at what resources they might have to help. He knew enough to pay attention to know what might have been entrusted to them for this effort. It begs the question. What all do you have that has been entrusted to your care- in your own life, your congregation's life, and your community- which may not yet be being used in such a wonderful way that God might be inviting? Or, what might God be up to now in your midst, and calling you to join in and be a part of?

Perhaps the best part of my call and role as your partner in ministry on synod staff, is the gift of being able to hear the stories and see the ministry in action with my own eyes that you are all a part of now, today. To see and hear and sense what it is God is up to among God's faithful people, and to invite others to come and taste and see that the Lord is good. I've seen stories like this and heard them too from so many congregations of this synod this year:

From one congregation, I have heard about how what used to be a somewhat small hunger program has turned into a regular food service to families in need where even forklifts are needed and involved now, police come out to help with traffic control, and the church has become a real community center and hub for its larger neighborhood. All of this done because it was listening to its community's needs, and decided- hey we have a kitchen, we can do something to help our neighbors. And so, they did and they do. That's a story that so many congregations in our synod can tell. By taking what might seem like a little food, and because God is at work in it, so much good is happening because of it.

From another congregation, because of the pandemic and the blessing that so many of the children in their faith community are under the age of 5, this congregation decided not to do a traditional vacation bible school but to pivot and do three intentional cross-generational gatherings of fun, food, faith, and fellowship together over the course of the summer.

From another congregation, who with their relatively new rostered minister, began asking questions about who God might be calling them to be and what God's mission might look like now, to discerning it was being called to be part of the first cohort of the Nebraska Synod's Vitality Initiative for Congregations-

joining seven other congregations to discern, ask big questions, wonder about what God might be up to, and to intentionally listen, learn, and experiment over the next two years.

And from another congregation, who began to explore partnerships prior to the pandemic, but now has felt like it's on fire for mission, by partnering with a neighbor congregation and reaching people it had never reached before through the wonders of online broadcasting-sharing the gospel in easy but new ways for them. A wonderful story that so many congregations in our synod have been telling too.

Our Joyful Response grounded in Gratitude

When we step back and witness to God's creative, redeeming, and reconciling work all around us, we can't help but be in awe. We shall give thanks and praise to God because of all that God has done, continues to do, and will do, for God's beloved. Our praise and thanks will lead us to sharing the promises of God, and God's story with our friends, loved ones, and the whole world. Telling all what we know that God has done for you and for me. As news of this spreads, the good news of the Gospel will spread, and God's mission to lift up the lowly and bind up the brokenhearted will continue. God's work of building up the kingdom will break-in more and more, in our world here and now. The poor will be provided for. Those who fear that they don't have enough, will receive what they need.

And we all, as God's own, will see and understand God's abundance and generosity at a deeper level. Sharing and holding in common, but more so, not hoarding what God provides but stewarding it well knowing that what we have has been entrusted to our care by God so that we might live abundantly, and that through us, some of God's work in the world might be done in response and in embodiment of God's love. And so, we joyfully and gratefully respond.

To that end, siblings in Christ of the Nebraska Synod, please hear my deep gratitude for you. For your generosity. For your discipleship. For your stewardship, and participation in God's continued work here in Nebraska and through your partnership and support around the world. Through your congregation's participation in mission share, which is your congregation's undesignated offering to the Nebraska Synod and to the larger Evangelical Lutheran Church in America, you do ministry that spans the globe and literally changes lives. On behalf of your siblings in Christ around the world, please hear my deepest thank you.

The truth of God's abundance that we hear in this week's stories I see and know in part, because I see and know them through the way you serve, give, and join with God's people as disciples and stewards. God's kingdom building work continues, through you, for you, and with you. Thank you for being part of it, and for following God's call and invitation. And thanks be to God, whose love and grace makes it all possible. Amen.