

Abundance
Luke 9: 10-17
September 2, 2018
Rev. Bob Griggs

I'm grateful that Todd invited me to preach this Sunday. It brings to a close the work I've done here this summer, first as sabbatical supply pastor, then as what I'm calling senior, executive pastoral volunteer. At least that's what I'm putting on my resume.

Resume padding aside, I want you to know how grateful I am to Todd, Abby, and all of you for your trust and for this opportunity to serve yet again at a church I love. It means so much to my wife Susan and me to be part of this community and to be able to give back a little. Thank you!

Saying thank you is also a good way to enter into this morning's scripture. It's a story of God's abundance, a story that invites our own gratitude as a response. For the early church the loaves and the fish in the story became images of God's bounty and generosity.

In the bible there are other images of God's abundance. In the 23rd Psalm, for example, there's God's bounty imaged as the cup that's filled until it overflows, not just enough, but more than enough. This image is included in our closing hymn.

Our opening hymn, "Come, O Fount of Every Blessing", offers yet another image of God's abundance. It's taken from Psalm 36 verses 7-9, where we read.

How precious is your steadfast love, O God!

All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.

They feast on the abundance of your house

and you give them drink from the river of your delights.

For with you is the fountain of life.

In your light we see light.

It's a valuable spiritual exercise to simply meditate on these words from the psalm – to picture the fountain and the river of delights, to read the text over and over, to let the words and images sink in. (Repeat above, Psalm 36: 7-9) Do this

often enough, and the words and images of the psalm will begin to change who you are. Not at first, not all at once, but live with these verses, take time, and you will be a better person for it.

The power of these images is important for me personally. They help me to respond to the abundant God, the fount of every blessing, with gratitude and especially with my own generosity. I've struggled all my life against the fear of scarcity that saps generosity. I'm of the generation whose parents lived through the Great Depression, and they were scarred by it. They lived with real fear of not having enough. They passed this fear on to me.

I'm blessed with more than I need, just as most of us here are. For me the fear of scarcity has no basis in reality. It's just fear, fear that inhibits generosity and curtails life, making one's life smaller than it needs to be. Spending time with the fount of every blessing helps heal this fear and makes life better. So I love this image and the scripture behind it. I am grateful to be able to share it with you today.

God's abundance and generosity is at the heart of today's scripture, the familiar story known, contrary to all the rules of English grammar, as the loaves and fishes. If it's not familiar story to you, then you should read the bible more. This morning it's included in our sermon series on surprising stories from the gospel of Luke, which leads to the question, "So what's so surprising about this scripture?"

Well, isn't that obvious? Jesus is speaking to a huge crowd. As supper time approaches, the disciples begin to worry, and suggest to Jesus that he send them away to find something to eat before it gets dark. He tells the disciples to feed the crowd themselves, but they tell him no way, that all together they only have five loaves and two fish.

Then Jesus takes the loaves and fishes, looks up to heaven, breaks the bread and gives the food to the disciples. They start distributing it, and they never run out. There was more than enough to feed everybody. Surely, feeding so many with so little is the surprise in the story.

Well, yes and no – it's a surprise for us, but I'm not sure how much of a surprise it was for them. You see, it wasn't unprecedented. Miraculous feeding stories appear several times in the Hebrew scripture - probably the most

well-known is God's feeding the people of Israel with manna in the wilderness at the time of the Exodus. That story is such a central one that in all likelihood it was in the minds of those whom Jesus fed with the loaves and fishes. So maybe they weren't as surprised as we would have been.

Because of this, I encourage us to look again at the story and see if there might be another surprise. I think there is. It's easy to miss, almost a throwaway line at the end of the story, where we read, "What was leftover was gathered up, twelve baskets of broken pieces."

The disciples had been worried about how to feed so many. Now each of them had a basket full of leftovers. There had been no need to worry or more afraid; God's abundance overwhelmed their fear. I think that this is the true surprise of the story.

As I've been thinking about this scripture, I've been reminded of my own experience with a program in Minneapolis called Loaves and Fishes. In response to an economic downturn in 1982, this program was launched at St. Stephen's Roman Catholic Church, just south of downtown. Five nights a week, anyone who was hungry could come to St. Stephen's for a hot meal. Like many other churches, my church volunteered to provide the meal one night a month. Loaves and Fishes was intended as a short term response to an immediate problem. Some thirty-six years later, it's still going strong, not just at St. Stephen's, but at multiple sites in the metro.

When we were involved in Loaves and Fishes, we usually served around four hundred people, some obviously street people, but many whom you could have met anywhere. All races and ages, but to me at least, a surprising number of elderly people and children, then again, these are our society's' most vulnerable.

I'm so glad we participated in the program. The only drawback was the meals where we served peas as one the vegetable. Some of the children didn't like peas, so peas found their way surreptitiously to the floor. Come clean up time with big brooms and then wet mops, the peas followed their God given tendency to role great distances. Try to sweep a pea up, and you send it careening off into the great unknown never to be seen again. I'm sure there some mummified peas stuck in a dark corner of the dining room at St. Stephen's from the times I was on clean up.

I always made it a point that at least once during their program, our confirmation class worked at St. Stephens. On the most basic level, we were living out our faith, following the way of Jesus and feeding the hungry. They were also learning about the truth of poverty in America. I remember driving the confirmands home after Loaves and Fishes one time, and they were very quiet, which was quite unusual. I asked them what was wrong and learned that while working on the serving line, they had looked up to see of their schoolmates holding out a plate to be served. Awkward, painful, but the truth that the hungry aren't some unknown other.

I'm hoping that this experience has stayed with these confirmands, and I hope that it has motivated them, not only to continue to serve those in need, but to work to eliminate the causes of hunger not only in America, but everywhere. It would be great if someday they held a big party at St. Stephen's to celebrate at long last the successful completion of the Loaves and Fishes Program, closed because there's no longer hungry people in the city.

This result would be totally in keeping with today's scripture. Like the fount of every blessing, this story of the loaves and fishes has the power to change us, to make us less afraid of not having enough, more willing to share, to be towards others as God has been toward us. We start with ourselves, but we're not done until we change the way things are for everybody.

In a little while, we will celebrate Holy Communion. It's in memory of the last supper of Jesus and his disciples. But it is also a reminder of this earlier meal when Jesus took the five loaves and two fish, looked to heaven, broke the loaves, and gave them to his disciples to distribute. As then, so now. All are invited to come and eat. There's nothing to worry about, more than enough, God's abundance is here. There are blessings for all at the table of Jesus Christ.

Amen.