

**Christ Presbyterian Church
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John Crosby
Abundance of Generosity
Exodus 16**

Life! Abundance! Creation! It is a generous God who tries to teach His children to live like that. To expand and grow! Last week Matt Moberg talked about how life leads to grace, leads to abundance, leads to the way we live in gracious response. This is how the Bible starts in Genesis 1, with a great song of abundance, praise for God's generosity. It talks about how well the world was created. It keeps saying things like "It is good! It is good! It is very good!" It declares that God blesses plants and animals and fish and birds and human beings and it pictures the creator saying, "Multiply! Grow! Be fruitful! Stretch out!" What I love is that the very end of creation comes right here, literally. Creation comes *here* on the Sabbath, on the day where God is so overrun with fruitfulness that He says, "I've got to take a break from all this. I've got to get out of the office." And so do you. That's why you're here. That's creation.

The Bible story is filled with examples of abundance that comes in unexpected places and gets shared. Often the vehicle that's used to share abundance is food. Later on in Genesis, God blesses Abraham and Sarah and their family, and then tells them they will be a blessing themselves—that they are going to be a blessing to all the people of the earth. "Bless the ones you run into." Abraham finds some strangers coming to his tent and he doesn't give them a kid's meal. He makes a feast for them. They turn out to be angels who in turn bless him. The story goes on with the prophet Elijah asking a widow, a single mom, to share a meal with him. "Please! I'm starving here. Would you give me something to eat?" She says, "My boy and I were just about to eat the last bit of food that we have and then die." But she shares and as she shares the meal, what little she has grows and grows and they eat and eat, day after day. That last meal stays.

The Bible tells the story of a time Jerusalem is besieged. It is like that story never ends; Jerusalem is still besieged. Jerusalem is surrounded by enemies and the people in the city are all starving. Some lepers say, "We might as well go out there and see if they'll feed us before they kill us." They leave the city and go out to the Amalekite camp and find that in the middle of the night, God has scared all the Amalekites away. The tents are filled with food for a feast they had been going to eat to celebrate their victory. The lepers go in, put their feet up on the tables and eat and eat and eat. Then they say, "This is crazy. We're stuffed and the people of Jerusalem are starving, so they call out to the people of the city to come and see how God has given them a feast. Out of unexpected abundance comes sharing that blesses others.

There is one more story about food that I learned from the great Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann*. He said the theme of abundance, God saying, "I'll give you more," continues all the way through Genesis until chapter 47 right at the end of Genesis. That's the story of Joseph, about when famine strikes the earth. All of the nations of the earth are starving except for Egypt

because God sent a dream to Pharaoh, and then sent Joseph to interpret it. As a result, the Egyptians end up storing great amounts of grain. Then when everyone else is starving, they not only eat, they open their storehouses to others, but Pharaoh makes everybody else pay for the food with their seed and then with their land and, finally, with their freedom.

There is an explosion of inequality in Egypt and in the ancient world, very few with great abundance and a great many scraping by in scarcity. You know how the story continues. Four hundred years later, the Israelites are still slaves in Egypt. God sends Moses and there are the plagues and then the Passover. Finally Pharaoh becomes so exasperated by his inability to control the Israelites that he calls in Moses and Aaron and says, "Take your people! Take your stuff! Just get out!" That's Exodus 12:32.

32 Take your flocks and herds, as you have said, and go. And also bless me."

That is an odd little incident at the end of verse 32. After Pharaoh says, "Get out of here," the great king of Egypt asks Moses and Aaron to put their hands on him and bless him. The ruler of all the abundance who has made everything scarce admits to this little community, "You are the future! Before you leave, lay your hands on us and give us blessing." Like Abraham, who is blessed so that he can bless others, the Exodus is a story that shows that the power of the future is not in the hands of the people who control the scarce resources. It is in the hands of the people who trust God's abundance. Which kind of person are you?

So the Israelites leave. Literally, they run for their lives, right? They see the Red Sea parted and they get away from Egypt. The waters close behind them and they look out to their future, but it's a desert. Exodus, chapter 16 says,

1 The whole Israelite community set out from Elim and came to the Desert of Sin, which is between Elim and Sinai, on the fifteenth day of the second month after they had come out of Egypt. **2** In the desert the whole community grumbled against Moses and Aaron. **3** The Israelites said to them, "If only we had died by the LORD's hand in Egypt! There we sat around pots of meat and ate all the food we wanted, but you have brought us out into this desert to starve this entire assembly to death." **4** Then the LORD said to Moses, "I will rain down bread from heaven for you. The people are to go out each day and gather enough for that day. In this way I will test them and see whether they will follow my instructions. **5** On the sixth day they are to prepare what they bring in, and that is to be twice as much as they gather on the other days."

13 That evening quail came and covered the camp, and in the morning there was a layer of dew around the camp. **14** When the dew was gone, thin flakes like frost on the ground appeared on the desert floor. **15** When the Israelites saw it, they said to each other,

"*Manhu!*" [Hebrew for "What is it?"]

For they did not know what it was. Moses said to them, "It is the bread the LORD has given you to eat. **16** This is what the LORD has commanded: 'Each one is to gather as much as they need. Take an omer

that's two quarts

for each person you have in your tent." **17** The Israelites did as they were told; some gathered much, some little. **18** And when they measured it by the omer, the one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little. Each one had gathered just as much as they needed. **19** Then Moses said to them, "No one is to keep any of it until morning." **20** However, some of them paid no attention to Moses; they kept part of it until morning, but it was full of maggots and began to smell. So Moses was angry with them.

I had never seen before that part of this is that the Israelites had created a public health hazard with the rotting food, the bugs, the crowded conditions. Moses is angry because our actions always have consequences for others. Sometimes they're good, sometimes they're bad but what we do always affects others. Back to the story.

21 Each morning everyone gathered as much as they needed, and when the sun grew hot, it melted away. **22** On the sixth day, they gathered twice as much—two omers for each person—and the leaders of the community came and reported this to Moses. **23** He said to them, "This is what the LORD commanded: 'Tomorrow is to be a day of Sabbath rest, a holy Sabbath to the LORD. So bake what you want to bake and boil what you want to boil. Save whatever is left and keep it until morning.'"

"Keep it for the Sabbath!" The Book of Exodus records a contest between God's song of generosity and the drumbeat myth of scarcity, "There is not enough." The contest to see who can get enough and deciding which song we're going to listen to is still with us. When the children of Israel are out in the wilderness beyond the reach of Egypt, they still look back and think, "Really? Really? Should we go back? All the money and food in the whole world is back there in Egypt." But when they finally turn around and look out into the wilderness, where there are no more storehouses, all they can see is wilderness. Just like us. Just like you. Just like me. When things aren't going well and they're hungry, they get cranky and complain and fear, but then something extraordinary happens. God's love comes trickling down out of heaven in the form of bread and they say, "*Manhu?*" "What is it?" Some Bibles translate *manhu* as manna. The meaning of manna is that the gifts of life from a generous God are enough. It's a wonder. It's a miracle. It's an embarrassment. It's irrational, but God's abundance transcends our fear of the future.

As I read the story, I see that three things happened to the bread. First, everybody had just enough. But because Israel had learned to live in a land of scarcity where a few had a lot and everybody else scraped by and people were scrambling for food, they started to hoard the food. That's the second thing. They started to compete for manna. Some of us still are. When they tried to bank it, invest it, it turned sour. It rotted because you cannot store up God's generosity. You have to share it or it rots. And third, Moses said, "You know what we ought to do? We ought to do what God told us at the beginning of the story in Genesis. We ought to have a Sabbath. Sabbath means *there is enough bread for tomorrow*. We don't have to hustle every day of our lives. People who think their lives consist of struggling to get more and more can never slow down enough because they are afraid there won't be enough. That's some of *you*."

The Gospel story of abundant love says that we were made by the incredible love of a God who loved the world into abundant being right from our births. I loved it that one of our new members, Michelle Mickelson, was baptized this morning because baptism declares that every one of us

has been miraculously reborn into being a child of God. The story of abundance says that our lives will end in God. Abundance cannot be taken away. In the words of the apostle Paul,

38 For I am convinced that neither death nor life, neither angels nor demons, neither the present nor the future, nor any powers, **39** neither height nor depth, nor anything else in all creation, will be able to separate us from the love of God that is in Christ Jesus our Lord [Romans 8:38-39].

Don't be afraid. Be generous. I love that. I wish I could live like that. But if you're like me, you read your Bible on good days, right? You come here and open the Bible or somebody has said something and you open the Bible. You read the Bible on good days, but every day you watch ads like this. [Slide shown.] It is more recognizable than just about any symbol on the earth. It's Nike. And the message of Nike is "Just do it." Get out there. We are our achievements. We must learn every day how to earn it for ourselves. According to the Nike story, the one who works the hardest and gets the most shoes, wins at the end. The Nike story says, "Don't share the gifts because there is no giver. You *earn* it."

So the real issue is, can the good news of God's abundance be trusted in the face of scarcity in the world? The story of scarcity is a tale of death and fear and hoarding and competition and comparison. Tipping instead of tithing to God, trying to look good and hold onto what I really need. It says the Israelites started to compete for the manna and they turned it into junk food. The people of God counter the fear of scarcity by retelling over and over and over the story of the manna—there is a more excellent bread than the Wonder Bread you buy in the store. It is the Bread of Life. You don't have to bake it, but you can't store it; you have to share it.

Is that what you model? Is that what your life says? Which kind of bread are you are eating? What are you modeling for your children and your grandchildren? Do they see you giving gifts that you almost can't afford? Do they see you serving those who have less? Do they stand with you as you do Families Moving Forward? Do they learn from you as you go and visit people in the hospital? Or do they see you on a treadmill, the person who is always working, always saying, "Get better grades. Work a little harder." Always going somewhere. Are you making meals for the homeless? Have you ever given your children the joy, the embarrassing joy of ringing Salvation Army bells as a family? Think about those two words together, embarrassing joy. It's a great thing, getting embarrassed by the people who walk by and won't meet your eyes. Do you model what giving looks like? Or do you throw out a couple of little coins? Do you model so that your children will know why it's important to receive manna and give it away? Jesus didn't need all the words I used to say it. He said it a lot more succinctly.

²⁴ You cannot serve God and mammon [Matthew 6:24].

You cannot serve God and money, mammon. You are going to serve one or the other. You cannot do what you please with your money or your land and still say "I love God."

²⁵"So I tell you, don't worry about everyday life [Matthew 6:25]

³² Your heavenly Father already knows all your needs, ³³ and he will give you all you need [Matthew 6:32-33]

Jesus says, "Don't be anxious. Everything will be given to you, but you have to decide." Christians have a long story, a long history, of trying to squeeze Jesus out of their real lives and reduce him to a private little Savior on Sundays unlike what happens in the Bible. In the Bible, you see that everywhere Jesus goes, the world gets rearranged. The blind get sight. The lame walk. The lepers are cleansed. The deaf hear. The dead are raised and the poor are freed from debt. The forgiveness of debts may be the hardest thing to do, maybe even harder than raising the dead to life because we hold onto our gifts so tightly.

When Jesus left ordinary people, He left them dazzled and amazed and grateful, but often He left the powerful people, the people of Edina and Minnetonka and surrounding suburbs, angry and upset because every time He performed a miracle, they lost a little of their specialness. The miracles dazzle us, but they should also make us a little nervous. Jesus starts right from the beginning by feeding people. He tells the fishermen, "Throw the net over the other side" and the net bursts with this miraculous catch of fish. Then He says, "Oh, leave the fish there. I'll show you how to fish for something else." He teaches 5,000 people with no food how God alone can give them what they need and they share and the food multiplies. When He leaves them, He shares one more meal with them and He says, "This is what you'll need." The Word who created the world became the Bread of Life and He says, "There's always room for one more at this table."

Jesus reincarnates Genesis 1. When people forget that Jesus is the Word of creation, that the Word speaks and the world happens, they forget that He is the Bread of Life. Then they start to live for junk food. I love junk food. I go right past the organics to McDonald's. It's the way I'm built. Too often the church forgets Living Bread and is tempted by the junk food of competition or comparison or hoarding what we have. Our faith is not just spiritual; it is about the transformation of the world. Jesus had it all, but Paul says,

⁹ . . . though he was rich, yet for your sake he became poor, so that you through his poverty might become rich [2nd Corinthians 8:9].

Today we say, "It takes money to make money." You have to invest to get more. The apostle Paul says, "It takes poverty, poorness of spirit, to produce abundance." All of you who are members got our stewardship letter that Jonathan Keller talked about this last week. Paul wrote about stewardship too, to the Corinthians, and Paul ends his stewardship letter by quoting Exodus.

¹⁸ . . . the one who gathered much did not have too much, and the one who gathered little did not have too little [Exodus 16:18].

Have we heard that before? When the manna comes, Moses says, "Trust God, the giver of gifts," and God turns the wilderness into abundance. God turns scarcity into generosity.

Sometimes the people who have the least show us that the best. A few years ago, my good wife and I took our kids on a mission trip to the border of Mexico. In one week's time, a group of us from the church built a very rudimentary house for a family. Actually, that's not right. We didn't build it for a family; we built it *with* a family. They worked with us all week. At the end of the time, we had a little ceremony where we prayed and planted a little tree. Then we said, "Why don't we have a feast, a fiesta." We've gone to Mexico several times and have always done this. At the end of our time there, our group always asked, "Would you like us to bring food in to your new

house or would you like to go out for a meal?" Every single time they would say, "We would love to go out." Of the three years we went there, every time they wanted to go out and every time when we asked, "Where would you like to go?" they said, "We would love to go to McDonald's." To them, that was where the rich people ate. In their lives, they never got to go to McDonald's.

So we take the family, seven or eight of them, to McDonald's and everyone is having a great time. The kids are eating like locusts and playing in the playground. At the end of the meal, Laura starts to clean up and she comes to a little boy who's got half of his food still there. It's all neatly wrapped up and she goes, "Let me take that from you." The little boy says, "No, no! *Para mi abuela.*" Laura says, "That's okay, honey. I can take it." "No. *Mi abuela.*" She points to the trash, but he doesn't want her to take it. She doesn't speak much Spanish so she turns to me and asks, "What is he saying?" I turn to the little boy and he says in Spanish, "My food is for my grandmother who is very hungry." He was saving half of his Big Mac to take home to his grandma. So of course, immediately this became my fault, but we bought 16 Big Macs for him to bring home to Grandma. What struck me about that story from ten years ago was that my children got to watch a little boy eat half of his Big Mac because he wanted to share the rest with his grandma. I would have loved to have seen the look on the grandma's face when he came back with a huge bag and said, "Look what I got, Grandma. For you!"

Do we live, do we give, as though God is going to run out of the Bread of Heaven? As though there is not going to be enough manna so we have to hoard it and hold on to it and earn it? Do we give away a little only when we have too much? Or do we trust that His mercies are new every morning like manna and serve others with His abundance?

Lord Jesus, I thank You that You want to comfort the afflicted and afflict the comfortable. I thank You that Your Word is manna and causes me still to say, "What is it?" And You remind me and my friends here that You are the giver of all good gifts and want to teach us to trust You enough to share. Help my sisters and brothers here share ridiculously, open-heartedly, open-handedly, generously, so that people might live and so that children who watch might believe that Mom and Dad, Grandma and Grandpa, and aunts and uncles trust God enough that they give it away. Bless us with joy, great joy. In Your Name. Amen.

*Credit to Dr. Walter Brueggemann who was quoted extensively in this sermon.

The nature of oral presentations makes them less precise than written materials; any lack of attribution is unintentional, and we wish to credit all those who have contributed to this sermon. Soli Deo Gloria.