

Sermon
November 18, 2018

Covenant Presbyterian Church
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Sharing God's Abundance
Psalm 65:1-13

A pastor began his ministry at First Presbyterian Church in Aberdeen, Mississippi. His first year as pastor he was visited by three men inquiring about one of his members, a widow who lived by herself. Was she getting out? Were her friends in Aberdeen keeping in touch? Was there anything they needed to know? The three men explained the situation, gave him their cards—one lived in New Jersey, another in Oklahoma, the other in California—and he was told to call them if there was anything they could humanly do to make her life happier or easier.

These three men arrived each year bearing presents their wives had picked out in the shops of San Francisco and New York. The men had hired a family who mowed the woman's yard, trimmed the bushes, and checked on tree branches and gutters. One of the men prepared the woman's tax returns each year, another contracted repairs on her house or made them himself. Sometimes they helped her shop for a new car. They were meticulous in wanting to check on everything and anticipate every difficulty the woman might face.

Each year they visited the President of the Bank of Mississippi in Aberdeen—there was a regular turnover in young bank executives—passed out their cards, explained that he was to notify them of any worldly need this woman might have, and they explained to the Bank President the situation.

The situation was this: Sixty years ago the three men had been three soldiers standing on the ground floor of a house in Normandy just a few days after D-Day when a German potato masher grenade came bouncing down the stairs. A fourth soldier, the woman's husband, threw himself on the

grenade, absorbing most of its impact. The three men lived because of his death.

After the war was over in 1945 the three men began making their way to Aberdeen, Mississippi on a regular basis to make sure that this man's widow would lack for nothing they had within their power to provide for her. They had been doing that for more than twenty-five years when this pastor became pastor of First Presbyterian Church.

Interestingly there were eighteen soldiers on the first floor of that house in Normandy. All eighteen of them were spared by the action of that one soldier's leaping on a grenade, and after the war was over three of them made their regular pilgrimages to Aberdeen, Mississippi. (Patrick J. Willson, Deep Gratitude retrieved from sermons.com) Why would these three make this decision when the others didn't? We don't know but I expect it was because they recognized the gift they had been given and were grateful for the gift of life itself. They made a decision to share and care for another because of the gift they had received.

Our scripture this morning reminds us of the gift we have received from God. The gift of God's abundance. A gift that calls us to praise God for God answers prayers. God forgives our transgressions. God blesses us. God delivers us. God is the hope for all the ends of the earth. And we are reminded that our God is the creator God who established the mountains, and silences the roaring of the seas and waves and people. For God provides what is needed to make the earth fruitful. The vision the Psalmist provides of the rich bounty provided by God is glorious:

You crown the year with your bounty;

your wagon tracks overflow with richness.

In other words wherever God is present richness abounds. God's very presence is life itself and abundance.

*The pastures of the wilderness overflow,
the hills gird themselves with joy,
the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,
The valleys deck themselves with grain,
they shout and sing together for joy.*

Friends, God's abundance fills the earth and causes creation to shout and sing for joy. This week we will celebrate Thanksgiving - a time when we remember the gifts of the harvest. As I told the children this morning the cornucopia filled with the fruits of the harvest is a reminder to us of the bounty of God's abundance. The horn of plenty reminds us of the plenty - the wealth - the gifts provided for us from God. It is a symbol of God's abundance. A symbol that has the power to transform the way we view life.

For my friends, we live in a world that emphasizes scarcity instead of abundance. We never feel like we have enough and therefore we live in fear and anxiety. "We are torn apart by the conflict between our attraction to the good news of God's abundance and the power of our belief in scarcity - a belief that makes us greedy, mean and unneighborly." (Bruueggemann, "the Liturgy of Abundance, the myth of scarcity, religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=533)

Almost twenty years ago Walter Brueggemann - one of my professors at Columbia Seminary and renowned Old Testament scholar, wrote an article entitled *The Liturgy of Abundance, The Myth of Scarcity*. He pointed out that from the very first word, our story as the people of God is a story of abundance. Hear what he said:

"The Bible is about abundance. From the first chapters of Genesis, God not only initiates abundance -- calling forth plants and fish and birds and animals -- but promises continued abundance by commanding them to 'increase and multiply' (1:22). God's generosity and fidelity reach their

climax on the sixth day, when God proclaims a sufficiency for ‘everything that has the breath of life’ and declares all this ‘very good’ (1:30-31).”

Scarcity, he argues, doesn’t show up until Pharaoh has a dream about a famine in the land. Up until then, blessing was the order of the world. God instructed Abraham and Sarah and all their family -- that includes you and me -- to be a blessing to the world, to be the force of well-being in the world, to be the reminder that creation includes enough of everything for everything. But then Pharaoh has a dream, and he sets forth the systems to control and monopolize the food supply. In the first year of the famine, the people give up their land for food. In the second year they give up their cattle. And in the third, they give up all they have left -- their children. “Pharaoh introduces the principle of scarcity into the world economy,” Brueggemann says. “For the first time in the Bible, someone says, ‘There’s not enough. Let’s get everything.’”

From that point forward, we have struggled to remember that there is enough, that, from the very moment of its founding, the world God created and that we inhabit has enough. The Bible offers story after story about God’s ongoing offer of abundance and our stubborn insistence on scarcity. Slavery for the Israelites was hard -- harder than anything most of us can imagine. And yet, they multiplied, so much so that Pharaoh ordered the midwives to kill all the boy babies.

In spite of all his manipulation and brutality, Pharaoh could not control the people of God. They continued to multiply, until an exasperated and fearful Pharaoh ordered Moses and Aaron to take their abundant people and leave. “Oh, and on your way out of town,” Pharaoh says, “Could you bless us with whatever it is you have?”

In one sweeping story, the villain -- the creator of scarcity, the one who enslaves in the name of greed, the one who stores up all the treasure he can find -- concedes to the Creator of the universe and

asks for a blessing. Brueggemann points out in his article that, “This text shows that the power of the future is not in the hands of those who believe in scarcity and monopolize the world’s resources; it is in the hands of those who trust God’s abundance.”

(<https://www.faithandleadership.com/sharing-god%E2%80%99s-abundance>)

So the challenge for us as a community of faith that is small is not to get caught up in the myth of scarcity that the world proclaims believing that we do not have enough and cannot do what is needed but to live as a community that trusts in God’s abundance and seeks to share God’s abundance with others. And this is what the Psalmist so powerfully reminds us this day.

For the Psalmist calls us to trust in God’s abundance. Trusting in God’s abundance means we believe God answers prayer and God forgives us. It means we live as God’s blessed chosen children filled with gratitude for all God has provided for us. It means we live in hope trusting in God’s power to shape the world for good. And my friends, when we trust in God’s abundance we are called to share God’s abundance with others. The very premise of Brueggeman’s article is that if we share out of God’s great abundance, there will be enough for all people.

What I have come to learn about you, the members of Covenant Presbyterian Church, is that you know what it means to share God’s abundance. Over and over again when we share a need the response is amazing. You step up to the plate. We are one of the most generous - although one of the smallest congregations - in the Family Promise network. Over and over again Gladys Muchoki offers prayers of thanksgiving for the many ways our financial gifts are bringing hope to her community in Kenya through the Ahadi Foundation which this congregation began. That ministry has reminded us that things are not what matter most in so much of the world but funds to buy feed, to teach skills and to provide for the basics of life. Through our day camp families in the community are being aided so parents can work when school is out and provide for their children. What this program requires is not

money but time and you provide that by sharing love with these children. Just this week we collected 43 boxes for Operation Christmas Child and over the next month we will gather gifts for Thornwell children and two needy families from Bells Ferry Elementary as well as providing gift cards for Family Promise families and monetary gifts for Kenya through our Angel Tree. Over and over again you share God's abundance with others.

And yet my friends, for us to continue to respond in all these ways to others needs, we must continue to support the ongoing work of the church. For we also share God's abundance when we come weekly to worship God. We share God's abundance when our wonderful choir offers praise to God and when we provide space for the study of God's word. We share God's abundance when we provide a Preschool for small children, when we open our building to many 12 step programs and a Hispanic congregation. We share God's abundance when we support the Scout program and when we respond to families who are in the hospital, are ill or have lost a loved one. And yet to continue to share God's abundance with one another and with a wider community we must maintain our buildings, pay the bills, and support our staff. And we cannot do that unless you, the members of Covenant Presbyterian Church, choose to continue to share God's abundance.

I, for one, believe that God will continue to bless this congregation. I believe that within this congregation there are those who envision the world as the Psalmist does - as a world filled with God's abundance. I believe there are those who choose to respond to God's blessings in the way those three men did by providing for their fellow soldier's widow. For when we do we are living into the world God envisioned and our lives will be blessed.

One day a man stopped in a convenience store to get a newspaper. He noticed that the owner of the store had tears in his eyes and kept looking out the window. He asked what was going on.

The store owner said, "Do you see that bus bench over there? There's a woman who comes there every day around this time. She sits there for about an hour, knitting and waiting. Buses come and go, but she never gets on one and no one ever gets off for her to meet. The other day, I carried her a cup of coffee and sat with her for a while.

"Her only son lives a long way away. She last saw him two years ago, when he boarded one of the buses right there. He is married now, and she has never met her daughter in law or seen their new child. She told me, 'It helps to come here and wait. I pray for them as I knit little things for the baby, and I imagine them in their tiny apartment, saving money to come home. I can't wait to see them.'"

The reason the owner was looking out the window at that particular moment was that the three of them the son, his wife and their small child were just getting off the bus. The look on the woman's face when this small family fell into her arms was one of pure joy. And this joy only increased when she looked into the face of her grandchild for the first time. The store owner commented, "I'll never forget that look as long as I live."

The next day the same man returned to the convenience store. The owner was again behind the counter. Before the store owner could say or do anything, the customer said, "You sent her son the money for the bus tickets, didn't you?"

The store owner looked back with eyes full of love and a smile and replied, "Yes, I sent the money." Then he repeated his statement from the day before, "I'll never forget that look as long as I live." (Retrieved from www.sermons.com/sermon/true-abundant-life/1466354)

Friends, when we share God's abundance it brings joy to our lives and we witness God's grace through the lives that we touch. May we continue to share God's abundance with others.