

If This is Abundance

A Sermon Expositing Matthew 14:13-21

By Brent Bowden

First Baptist Church of Rochester

Back then it looked like a helicopter to get to school, a sports car for getting around town, a couple of jet skis for the weekends. I remember that I thought it would be cool to have a full size hitting net in the back yard to practice my golf swing. I didn't even think to imagine that if I had won the lottery I might not have the same back yard. Such was my limited capacity for imagination in my elementary days, but the thought experiment has stuck with me and I've developed – I think – a more keen idea of what it would be like to want for nothing.

My parents and my sister and I used to have this conversation around the dinner table once in a while – what would it be like if we won the lottery. We even spent the enormous sum of \$1 every other week to facilitate our conversation. On the way home from work dad would stop and purchase one lottery ticket using the months and dates of our four birthdays as our numbers. Because three of us share the same birth month and I have the same birth month as the *day* of my mother's birthday there are exactly 6 numbers among the 4 of us. Our lucky numbers never were very lucky, but we were unaware back then of the social consequences of state lotteries, so playing that one ticket every other week gave our imaginative conversations about what we would do if they *became* lucky an edge of reality.

If I recall, my sister wanted a private ballet studio. Mom wanted us to have more space in our home and a new car. Dad, who remains to this day one of the hardest workers I've ever known, mostly dreamed of new tools. He's the only person I think I've ever known who wanted to win the lottery to make going to work even better. We all have our ideas about what it would look like if we lived in abundance.

Some of my ideas – only some of my ideas - have grown up a bit. Don't get me wrong. If money were no object my woodshop would be the envy woodworkers everywhere, but abundance to me wouldn't only be about what I could *have*, but also about what I could do, experiences I could have, where I could go, and about what I could share and enable in the world. I'm betting you could come up with some pretty specific ideas about how your life and the world around you would be different if we all lived in abundance.

It's good that we all have those ideas and it's even good that we talk about them from time to time, because I am convinced that one part of the calling God has placed upon the church is to be in a world marked by scarcity, a sign of abundance. You and I collectively and individually, I think, are called to demonstrate to the world what it would be like if we all did live in abundance. I think that's why a version of the story we read from Matthew this morning about Jesus multiplying the loaves and fish shows up in all 4 gospels. Jesus's birth only made it into two of the four, but the feeding of a multitude made it into all of them! The original writers telling the story of God walking the earth simply needed a story about the food not running out, about there being enough for everyone, about abundance.

We do well to take notice though, especially if we're going to be in the business of trying to demonstrate what abundance looks like, that abundance doesn't feel like we imagine it will. When I was kid I imagined that living in abundance meant that I had enough resources to have all of what I need all of the time and pretty a sizable portion of what I *want* most of the time. Even as I've grown up and applied my wish for abundance to

Note: Sermon manuscripts are written for the ear rather than the eye. If grammar or punctuation seem unconventional and the meaning unclear, try pronouncing the sentence aloud phonetically.

things beyond my personal possessions and experiences I still assume that abundance feels the same. Even applied altruistically I look at the ills of the world and I tend to believe that if we just had more resources, more time, more space, more people we could solve all these problems. Some of those things would doubtlessly help, but the irony is that's the kind of thinking that underlies the existence of most of the problems in our world. When we start thinking we just don't have enough x to do y or enough b to make a happen we're convincing ourselves of the opposite – that we don't have enough, that there isn't enough, that we're too limited in whatever way.

I wonder how many of the things we face daily in our lives, but even more importantly the things we face as a society begin not with a lack of what we need, but with a misunderstanding of what abundance looks like and feels like. Consider the people gathered around Jesus that miraculous day that he and his disciples fed them all. There was more than enough for everyone there to eat, but at no point did it ever appear that there was even *enough* let alone more than enough. Jesus didn't take the loaves and the fish, offer a little blessing, and *POOF*, it became a giant pile of food. No, after the blessing he just passed what he had. The disciples took it to the people and each in their turn they took what they needed and passed the extra on to someone else. The moment of the miracle itself was actually pretty underwhelming. Nothing floated down from heaven, the abundance didn't appear from behind a curtain or from a puff of smoke. It was just gradually realized as each person took what they needed and passed the rest on to the person next to them. It occurs to me that there may have even been a few people there reluctant to take anything at all, because there didn't seem to be enough for everyone. But everyone ate and as they started putting their leftovers back in the basket they found that there was not only enough, but more than enough.

Abundance never felt for them the way we paint it in our “if I ever won the lottery scenarios”. Abundance doesn't come with that kind of frivolity or certainty or excess. It comes just a little at a time, but its there all the time. It doesn't come raining down on us in droves it gets handed to us by the people we're with and we pass it on when we're done. I'm not sure God's provision will ever come to us in such volume that all our worries will be gone. We may always wonder if there is enough for everyone, but that's what will keep us hoping there is. What abundance as God sees it lacks in giving us a sense of security it more than makes up for in beauty and hope. You see if that's what abundance is – if it's the people of God coming together to share in what as much as in blessing – if its God's people recognizing that we've got enough for now, but being a little nervous about how long it can hold out – if it's God's people constantly wondering if what we've got will meet the needs of everybody here, and what we'll do if others show up too – if it's recognizing that the provisions weren't what we thought they would be, but they've been exactly what we've needed at each step – if abundance is looking ahead and wishing it were some other way, but looking back and not wanting it any other way – if abundance is a group of people taking what they need and passing the rest along to the others around them and in so doing realizing that God has been among them all the while – well, then this is abundance, friends. Let us eat.