

# What Abundance Looks Like

A Sermon Expositing John 6:1-12

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Close your eyes and imagine, what does abundance look like? Is it an account statement of some kind (checking, savings, investment, retirement) an account statement that says there is plenty there, you're not going to run out? In places not very far from here abundance looks to folks like row upon row of tall, green, healthy stalks of corn or fields of waving wheat enough to fill the contracts and then some. Perhaps for you it's an afternoon in the sun surrounded by good company and a table set amply with enough food for everyone such that you know you're not going to run out? Or maybe it's a calendar devoid of appointments and goings on for a day, or a week; a vacation in which the hustle and the rush of life is stilled so that you can get to those things you love to do – or even to enjoy uninterrupted time of not doing anything - without the risk of running out of time?

The gospel writer tradition has named John has remembered for us an image of Jesus whose greatest gift is abundance. Four chapters after our reading for this morning he'll spell it out clearly when he says of the sheep who garner his love and care, "I have come that they may have life and have it abundantly." But even before he spells it out so clearly we have seen Jesus at a party making the most wonderful wine out of the most abundant resource, water. We've read this morning of his making 5 loaves of bread and 2 fish abundant enough to feed 5,000 people. Even to the very end of his writing abundance is key. The final chapter of John – after the crucifixion, after the burial, after the resurrection, after all the culminating moments of the gospel – John's final scene of Jesus and his disciples plays out on the beach after a fruitless night of fishing has led to a bright new morning with a catch so abundant it could hardly be hauled in. Abundance – God's gift to God's children if you ask John.

But what *does* this God-given abundance look like? Is it to have enough of a thing that you'll never run out? I suspect that if we had put our minds together before having read again this story of Jesus providing abundant bread and fish to the multitude that we might have concluded that the abundance of God *does* have something to do with having enough of a thing that we'll never run out as long as – and this part comes from the collective wisdom we share – as long as we're talking about an abundance of the right thing. God's abundance is enough peace that we'll never run out. God's love is enough love that you'll never run out of it. I think we might have defined God's abundance over against the abundance thought of in the world by *what thing* is given in abundance. And such an idea is certainly worthy of recognition and consideration, but I think there is more in John's story for us than that. There is here a facet of what abundance is conceptually that I think could change the way we live our lives.

You see, whatever it is that we imagine in abundance whether it is wealth or time or peace or good food or whatever we might imagine, we tend to understand that what makes those things abundant is having enough of them that we'll never run out. In the modern world it would be no surprise if we even sort of imagined them on a ledger. Abundance is when there is enough joy, energy, money, time, whatever on the income side that no matter what we do on the expenditure side we'll still never run out. Of course that's what abundance is! It

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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.

seems so intuitive. It is to have a such a quantity of that which we long for as to exceed our most aggressive consumption. We can run and never grow weary, spend and never go broke, eat and never run out.

Except, I don't think that's what abundance is if you ask John. In fact, I think that with a survey of our *world* we could see that that's not abundance, not really. The problem with that definition of abundance is that it defines plenty over against what we have. If abundance means having enough that we'll never run out then we don't experience abundance very often in this life and pursuing it leads us into deep trouble. When we, as a people, believe that we have more than enough of a given resource bad things tend to happen. Mountain tops get literally cut off in pursuit of coal, climate shifts as we burn fossil fuels, life-enriching labor standards get tossed to the wind as commerce consumes every hour of employees' lives, forests get leveled, species go extinct. And at the personal level schedules get overpacked, health wanes, debt piles up, fatigue rises – all when we believe that we've got enough that we'll never run out. And that may not even be the worst part of such a view of abundance. What happens when we suddenly realize that something *might* run out, that we don't or even that we might not have abundance. Name for me please, one war that began without a collective sense of fear for something being taken away – resources, autonomy, power, territory. Some say that religion is the cause of wars. Unfortunately they're not entirely wrong, but usually religion is merely the device used to claim one's divine right to whatever is being fought over. Mostly we fight over money and power and we fight when we're afraid we might run out of it. And even when all-out war isn't the outcome, we develop public policy that exploits some for the benefit of others, we lean more into security than we do community, we closely define what is "ours" and work hard to keep others away from it, generosity takes a back seat to protection. Name for me one social ill that doesn't have near its root a desperate pursuit of abundance as defined by this world, I'll wait.

Friends, we've been searching for that kind of abundance for millennia. What we need isn't more of any given thing, not even more of the good things. What we need is a new understanding of abundance. What we need is to focus on those baskets of bread and fish lying there after the 5,000 had gorged on 5 loaves and 2 fish. You caught that part of the story right? They started with a miniscule amount of food as compared to their need. Talk about the opposite of abundance as we too often define it – the potential for expenditure (hungry people) in one column profoundly outweighed the balance of resources on the other side (only five loaves and 2 fish). And yet, when they'd all gorged themselves on as much as they could there was so much left over that all of grandma's Tupperware wasn't enough to store it. Do you see the difference? There was little, then they ate, then there was a lot. Is it possible that the gifts of God work in reverse from what we've grown to expect in this world? Here, consumption depletes. When we eat, there is less; when we spend, there is less; when we consume, there is less. But with God's gifts, consumption MULTIPLIES!?! The more of what God gives us that we consume, that avail ourselves to, the more of it there is in the end?

If that were true, it would change the way we view the world around us, it would change the way we live our lives. That would mean we could look into places where resources are depleted and see abundance anyway! We could see our world the way DeVone Boggan did.

In the mid 2000s DeVone's city, Richmond, California, had a huge problem - gun violence. The kinds of efforts we might immediately imagine would be necessary to curb such an issue weren't working. No matter how many arrests were made, no matter how many extra police beats were added, the violence only grew. DeVone had another idea, but it was completely counterintuitive. Still, desperate, the city gave him a chance to implement his ideas and funded a pilot program. He immediately got to work hiring his staff – the only job requirement was to have a felony on your record. His team's job was to identify within the city the 50 people most likely to commit gun violence and, in his words, "hunt them like they hunt each other." The counterintuitive part was what they intended to do after catching them. They planned to help them. They gave each of the 50 most likely to commit gun violence a staff person who was there to help them through whatever grief might be spurring the potential violence, because contrary to popular belief there are very few people who are just plain violent. Violence comes from somewhere, usually pain, grief, fear, and as we've already

suggested, a fear of lacking basic needs. So DeVone and his team talked to them, listened to them, resourced them, connected them to the things they needed most, and even paid them. Yep, a team of ex felons used city resources to give stipends to potentially violent people. And because of that, in 2019 a study demonstrated that the city of Richmond had cut its rate of gun violence in half. Devone has passed his work in Richmond off to his successors and started an organization to help other cities do the same kind of work that runs afoul of so much of what we think we know about how the world works. That organization is called Advance Peace.

Do you see what DeVone and his teams are doing? They're coming alongside lives and going to areas where resources are often scarce and they're spending the very few resources they have in the name of peace. Peace, from a faith perspective, we understand to be a gift of God and as it turns out when you consume the gifts of God you don't end up with less, you end up with more! To consume just a bit of peace is to multiply peace. To take in the love of God is to multiply the love. To take in the grace of God is to multiply grace!

That's abundance! To look at what is scarce in the world – peace, justice, love, hope – and rather than trying to protect it, save it, hold on to it; spend it, consume it, cast it to the wind and watch it return in basketfuls! I wonder what in your life, in our neighborhoods, in our community is so scarce that it could only be abundance!

Amen.