

“Feasting on God’s Abundance”

Psalm 36:5-12

Rev. Meredith Loftis

August 4, 2019

*Psalm 36: 5 Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the clouds.*

*6 Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains,
your judgments are like the great deep;
you save humans and animals alike, O Lord.*

*7 How precious is your steadfast love, O God!
All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.*

*8 **They feast on the abundance of your house,
and you give them drink from the river of your delights.***

*9 For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light we see light.*

*10 O continue your steadfast love to those who know you,
and your salvation to the upright of heart!*

*11 Do not let the foot of the arrogant tread on me,
or the hand of the wicked drive me away.*

*12 There the evildoers lie prostrate;
they are thrust down, unable to rise.*

The Word of the Lord.

This summer we have played host to many groups traveling across the country in need of some respite and space for their sleeping bags, and we have abundant floor space...but even better, we’re free. For a while there, staff members were taking turns coming in on weekends to welcome and ensure that these groups, often mission groups from other Presbyterian churches, could get in and navigate this massive building. We have been delighted to open up our facility and witness the many teenagers and adults that are dedicating time to serving as the hands and feet of Christ this summer.

A month ago, I was slated to preach the Sunday after July 4th, and I was just sure that it’d be a ghost town, with just a couple of warm bodies in the pews. So when I walked into the doors of the chapel for the early worship service, and saw it was to be the largest number of people in that service ever, I was blown away. Staring back at me, in bright pink matching t-shirts, 50 teenagers and a few adult chaperones, sat ready for worship. Nearly one side of the chapel was completely full, and the other side was steadily filling too. I was astounded and realized that I’d forgotten that we had a group from First Baptist Church of Asheville staying the week with us. It was quickly apparent that we didn’t have enough bulletins and that we’d have to share. [I know many of you remember this.] But we made it work. During the hymns, the singing was louder than normal, the passing of the peace took a bit longer, more prayers were shared. It was a great worship service.

What sticks with me about that Sunday is that we had to quickly run and grab more bread for the communion service, which we serve weekly at this service. It was clear that one loaf wasn’t enough, and more was needed. While it didn’t miraculously multiply, we had our faithful communion coordinator quickly dart to the sacristy to retrieve more.

And we didn’t run out.

The feast was had. All were served. God's table provided as it always does. God's abundance continued to flow. God's abundance showed up unexpectedly that day in our visitors. God's abundance never ceases.

Nobody worried, because we knew that God always shows up and always provides.

Nobody worried, because we knew that among our sisters and brothers of faith, nobody would lack, for God's abundance is realized in each other. Attuned to God's Spirit in those moments of worship, our eyes see a little clearer, our hands reach a bit farther out to others, and our bodies are fed with something more that perhaps we can't quite explain.

What we do know, and what King David helps us express in this Psalm, is the extravagant grace and steadfast love of the Lord.

Each time we come to this table we remember the heights and depths of God's grace, the steadfast love that always seeks us out; love and grace so extravagant that the psalmist seeks to describe it, but knows it cannot be fully captured; our human words barely suffice.

Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens, your faithfulness to the clouds.

As far as we can see, God's faithfulness extends even further.

Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains, your judgments are like the great deep; you save humans and animals alike, O Lord.

God's grace and steadfast love is so amazing that it is offered to all of creation, not just to humans, but to the creeping things of the earth, to the animals around us! In God's house, we are surrounded not just by each other, but the flesh and blood of God's handiwork from across the earth. Nothing is forgotten.

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.

The stories we tell ourselves at God's table are the stories of extravagant abundance, of radical welcome and joyful praise, where all people feast; where we bring nothing to the table but ourselves, because there is nothing we can bring that would be suitable. We come laden with the burdens of the world, with little to offer.

At our tables, we are quick to complain and condemn. How is that possible, we ask? We don't have enough. At God's table, the best wine flows freely. The loaves and fish multiply beyond our wildest imagination.

At our tables, we pick with whom we surround ourselves. At God's table, we may be surprised as to who we find ourselves surrounded by.

At our tables, eventually the bread baskets empty, and only fragments and crumbs remain. We hide the good stuff for later when everyone has gone home. At God's table, there is always plenty. The banquet is replenished as often as needed. At God's table, grace and love get planted deep within us, sometimes in surprising ways, when we think we are incapable.

Outside, in the world beyond these walls, it is too easy to give in to the stories of scarcity, poverty, and fear, the narratives that consume us so that we think that we must hoard, that there's never enough, that we must maintain our security at all costs. We become people of scarcity when we believe those stories of dry bones. That is not who we are. We come to this table to remember: out of death, out of nothingness, God created something more than we could have dreamed. In the tomb a body was laid, and in the dawning of the new day, the tomb was broken open and God's steadfast presence revealed itself in the Godman who could not stay dead.

The story of God's abundance cannot be contained within these walls; it will spill forth with or without us. Our invitation is to taste and see, and then offer the same invitation to others.

But inside, we know that we can feast on the abundance of God's house; that we'll be given drink from the river of God's delights. Dry bones will be given new life.

One day, a teacher held up a bright red tomato and asked her students, "*How many seeds are in this tomato?*"

The students, believing that they needed to solve the problem, quickly formed groups and came up with different theories. There had to be a rational, logical way to determine this. They set to work.

The groups had various creative ways of solving this question. One group "tried to do it by visually recreating what they 'thought' an inside of a tomato looked like, quartering it and then, estimating the seeds in each section. The answers differed by a few seeds to a thousand or more seeds."

Tomatoes were everywhere. Students were fervently counting miniscule white seeds, red slime covering their hands.

After walking among the groups, hearing their various theories, the teacher gathered them back together. She asked again, "How many seeds are there in this tomato?" Before anyone could respond, looking at them she simply stated, "There are enough."

"There are enough. Enough for me to save to plant next year, enough for me to give to my neighbors so they too can have tomatoes, and then, next year, they will save seeds and give seeds to others just as I will again share my seeds."

In that short time, she taught them "the theory of abundance."

She left them with this sobering question: "Who benefits from seedless fruits and vegetables?"

Her answer: "The person who has the seeds."¹

We have been given those seeds of abundance to sow into this world to counter the story of scarcity that too many people believe life is based upon. We have been planted and rooted deeply in God's story, a story of amazing abundance, rooted to produce seeds outside these walls and share God's abundance.

Each time we come to this table, we taste and see God working in and among the bread and cup, I pray that we are reminded of not only God's abundance, but that God's abundance is planted in us; seeds of God's *hesed*, steadfast love, permeate through us and into the surrounding places we find ourselves.

At times, it is hard to see what seeds of abundance we have in ourselves, we think we only have fragments to offer the world.

I know that at times I feel that I am fragmented and have little to offer. When the bills seem to pile up, the weeds become a jungle in my yard, my house needs constant work, my 90 year old grandparents and their needs, I think, what do I have left to offer? And yet I am reminded that even a tiny tomato seed reveals something. Even the smallest part of us is enough to use to show how amazing God's steadfastness and abundance are.

Jesus told his disciples, "Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost."

And the disciples did, and from those meager five loaves of bread and two tiny fish given by a poor peasant boy, an abundance of leftovers were gathered. 5000 people had been fed by Christ, and Jesus would not let even the fragments be wasted.

"It is part of the miracle: how Jesus, with such intention, cares for the fragments following the feast. He sees the abundance that persists, the feast that remains within the

¹ <http://www.i-open.org/blog/the-tomato-story-and-shifting-from-scarcity-to-abundance-in-half-a-day>

fragments. We might think the marvel of the story is that there is enough for everyone. And yet for Jesus, enough does not seem to be enough. There is more: a meal that depends on paying attention to what has been left behind, on turning toward what has been tossed aside.

Call it the persistence of wonder, or the stubbornness of the miraculous: how Christ casts his circle around the fragments, and will not lose his hold on what is broken and in pieces. How he gathers them up: a sign of the wholeness he can see; a foretaste of the banquet to come.

I close with this poem by Jan Richardson:

Blessing the Fragments

Cup your hands together,
and you will see the shape
this blessing wants to take.

Basket, bowl, vessel:
it cannot help but
hold itself open
to welcome
what comes.

This blessing
knows the secret
of the fragments
that find their way
into its keeping,
the wholeness
that may hide
in what has been
left behind,
the persistence of plenty
where there seemed
only lack.

Look into the hollows
of your hands
and ask
what wants to be
gathered there,
what abundance waits
among the scraps
that come to you,
what feast
will offer itself
from the fragments
that remain.²

² <https://paintedprayerbook.com/2012/07/22/gathering-the-fragments/>