

PASTORAL PRAYER

Gracious God of all creation, into your house we come to worship, recognizing a new week, a new month, and new possibilities for the future. We seek this newness. We wish to set aside conflict, set aside judgment, set aside all those easily petty things that focus our on what we want. To be in this place instead reminds us to focus on what serves you and our neighbor. We become focused on ourselves too often, and we simply cannot see you when our eyes are locked onto our own petty agendas. Forgive us our sinfulness that neglects neighbor for our self-righteousness. Forgive our sinfulness that addresses our own pains at the expense of the pains of the other. For these requests and the ones we lift in your presence, aloud and otherwise, hear our prayer, eternal loving God, and lead us to newness.

Gracious God, we seek to live in your abundance, in the many ways it presents itself. However, God, you not only require that we preach it but that we live it. Help us to receive your abundance gratefully, to give back thanks, and to pass that abundance on forward, so that it may multiply continuously in your glory. Help us to hold onto this message gratefully, never giving into the world's focus on deficit when you give so much and lead us to pass it all on. We pray all these things in the name of the Lord of Abundance, Jesus Christ, who taught us to pray abundantly and adamantly in one voice, saying...

SERMON

There's one story that I learned in my childhood that I remember now and then. It's called "Stone Soup." Has anyone heard this story? Well, it begins with a couple of travelers, set long ago, coming to a village and asking for food. None of the villagers share, so they fill a big pot with water and a couple of stones. The villagers, one by one, come by and ask, "What are you making?" "Stone soup!" they say. "It's wonderful, but it requires something

more to be its best.” With this logic, they convince each of the villagers to give them an addition to the soup, like carrots, onions, or herbs. Over time, quite a fantastic soup is made. The visitors then invite everyone in the village to come and share their great stone soup together, and the visitors and the community finally and truly come together.

In first grade, we read Stone Soup, then acted it out by bringing all kinds of things to school and making a soup together. The tale of Stone Soup is a story about abundance, just like our scripture reading today. We hear the story of the loaves and the fishes a lot; it’s an iconic story that sticks with you. The danger is if we hear it too much, it can lose its power. It’s time to hear it again with a new emphasis. Let’s hear the miracle with this idea in mind: the miracles of Christ are never to be seen as ends in themselves, as proofs for why he is the Son of God. Instead, the miracles are meant to give us insight on who God is. They are meant to show us God’s mission to the world. The miracle of the loaves and fishes guides us to worship God by pursuing God’s mission we see through that miracle. That mission is abundance to all people, especially the hungry. Let’s dig deeper into this miracle to understand abundance, what our mission of abundance is, and how we can live that out in the many ways God presents abundance to us.

There are many hidden messages behind this important story. Let’s peel back the layers to get the full picture. The Texts for Preaching commentary first gives us a straight comparison. When you look at how the abundance of food is given, you see how Jesus gives out the bread but it doesn’t say anything about the fish. In that way, this story has Eucharistic symbolism; it’s about sharing the bounty of communion together, and everyone, everyone here has a place at the communion table. The Texts for Preaching Commentary also gives us an important comparison with the story of this miracle and the

story right before it: the beheading of John the Baptist at Herod's birthday party. In that story, we have the seemingly grand image of abundance with the wealth of food, guests, and festivities at Herod's birthday party. That abundance quickly turns out to be simply a façade with Herodias' scheming to have John killed. The true abundance in this story is an abundance of hatred and revenge. The complete opposite is the story that follows, the story we read in our second scripture reading. This story is also a façade but with the opposite twist. We have the façade of a lack of abundance. This story takes place in the middle of nowhere; indeed, scripture says that the meeting takes place "in a deserted place." There are many people but little to eat, and the time grows close to dining. Where there is seemingly nothing, Jesus changes the picture from deficit into fullness. In the previous story, the empire is the focus of the abundance, and it is found to be bankrupt. In our story, the abundance comes from God and is found to be the true abundance. But God is only the spark, the source, but not the means and the end through which abundance comes to completion. It's our job as the disciples today to spread the abundance.

Once again, the key word and message here is "abundance." We recognize that our God is a God of abundance, even in the midst of seemingly dire circumstances. However, I would suggest that it's hard to really pin down what that means. We often think of abundance when it comes to riches; abundance means having the portfolio and bank accounts of Bill Gates or good ol' Nebraskan Warren Buffet. That's not right. On the other hand, we can often think of abundance spiritually, but it's not that simple. We often focus on what God gives us and end the discussion right there. These are faulty and incomplete.

Abundance applies to so much. Abundance is not about you or you or you. It's about what WE have together. It's not about the individual; it's about the community of believers.

Abundance is not about how it benefits us but how we share it with those who do not share it. We have the abundances that God has provided, but each of them are incomplete. Some of us are supplied with an abundance of things or money, some of us have an abundance of skill, some of us have an abundance of wisdom, of leadership, of all the gifts and things we have on this earth, and we recognize that God provides them all but we put them into use. The whole of the community brings it all together, just like the story of Stone Soup. Only when they come together, only when we share, do we find the fullness of abundance.

One line from the 2002 Spider-Man movie is iconic: “With great power comes great responsibility.” Indeed, to those whom much is given, much is also required. In Christian terms, grace is a gift and a responsibility: in this case, the grace of abundance. Indeed, abundance is never an end in itself. We need to look at the story of Stone Soup as an example, but it is not the same as the miracle from the bible. It is counter-example to the story of the loaves and the fishes. But we have to get the focus of the story right. If we look again at the scripture, Jesus really doesn’t do a lot here. The disciples scoff at the idea of doing this great thing with so little. Jesus doesn’t simply reprove them. Jesus doesn’t say, “You’re wrong; I’ll take care of this.” Jesus provides the miracle but Jesus doesn’t put the miracle into action. The disciples also try to disown the situation: “Send them away,” they say. It’s someone else’s problem. Jesus responds simple statement: “They need not go away; you feed them.” As Christ’s followers, the problems of others, the hunger, the issues of the world are not someone else’s problem. Christ gives us abundance, and we are meant to use it. Christ is bestowing abundance here, but the disciples are the means through which the abundance is given. The bottom line is that we cannot simply preach God’s abundance; we have to enact it as the Body of Christ. No problem is ever not our concern

when there are people directly before us. The disciples then and us as the disciples now are the ones to deliver God's gracious abundance.

There is one last ingredient. The difference between this scriptural story and Stone Soup is the compassion of Jesus that led the sharing. There was no compassion in Stone Soup, only trickery, because the people in the community looked at these visitors with apparent self-centered skepticism. They did not want to share their ingredients, but when they saw they could take part, they began to share. The finale of both stories is what we desire: everyone gathers over the same pot, having shared their part and sharing as one in the results. Without compassion, it is not the loaves and the fishes, it is Stone Soup, but that's not in scripture. Compassion mixed with sharing the abundance is the true sense of faithfulness. Abundance from God for the Christian is never an end in itself. The abundance is meant to be passed on with the compassion of Christ, to be spread to those who are searching for the same abundance. The funny thing is that when we pass on abundance with compassion, we will find that our abundance and our compassion grows.

Because we meet in this building, we must recognize that we live in constant abundance. It's a hard thing to do, because everywhere you look, you see the opposite message. You need this product or you will be absolutely ugly! You have no way to change the world! You are devoid of all skill and talent! You should wish you are this person instead of you! The world looks at personal deficits or personal abundance and names them as the most important thing. But we look larger. I don't have the bank account I want or the newest car. I don't have this person's public speaking ability or outgoing personality. Our church and its resources may not be what we want them to be. We don't have a huge community and a limitless bank budget like other churches we know. In other words, what

in the heck are we supposed to do with a crowd of five thousand people having nothing but five loaves and two fishes? We're telling God, "We don't have what it takes. Send these people away to do their own thing." We say abundance doesn't exist. By focusing on what we don't have, we lose clear focus on what we DO have. Give all these excuses to Christ, and he will respond the same way he did to the unbelieving disciples: "You give them something to eat." In other words, "Use what you have." We each and all together have abundance but we can't see it when we only want to see what we don't have. From these simple gifts, even so few as five loaves and two fishes, abundance does come. Because we worship this God that turned so few loaves and fishes into a great feast, we cannot and should not look at ourselves in that light. In your lives and in this church, God works abundance always. With this viewpoint on the world, things become much clearer.

We live in our own little Stone Soup story as the church. The difference is that we must live with compassion instead of selfish suspicion. We must give freely of our ingredients, as Christ as provided them to us, instead of giving them begrudgingly in that old story. God provides abundance in obvious and not-so-obvious ways throughout life. We each have an ingredient to add to the soup. The enemy of abundance is focusing on deficit, something that Jesus never demonstrates for us and this miracle demolishes as falsehood. Our God is a God of abundance, never of deficit. Our task, first of all, is to recognize its presence and to spread that abundance for our benefit, for our worship to God, and for our service to the other. When we bring together all the ingredients, we will see there is more than enough for all. Our individual means of abundance bring forth life for us and our neighbor, but only when they are shared. Thanks be to God for this miracle, for this lesson, and for the means to use these gifts! Amen and Amen.