

PENTECOST 10B – July 29, 2018
Participants, Not Simply Recipients
(John 6:1-15)

ABUNDANCE... I've always liked that word, just the sound of it, but obviously the meaning of it as well. Quite simply, abundance is the state of having "more than enough." That's certainly a nice thought, wouldn't you say? Even a comforting thought. Especially since many people do not even have *enough*, let alone *more than enough*.

Now abundance – in particular material or financial abundance – is not something I have personally experienced very much of in life. But Jeanette and I certainly had a *taste* of abundance on our first (and to date only) cruise, years ago, in Hawaii.

You see, it was a present we gave ourselves for our 25th wedding anniversary. (Actually we had celebrated our 25th the year before, but we had just sold our home in Pennsylvania and so we had a little extra cash on hand.) And it was a blast! For seven whole days we toured the Hawaiian Islands on the *Pride of Hawaii*, Norwegian Cruise Line's newest and largest cruise ship at the time. In fact, at 92,000 registered tons, and costing over half a billion dollars, the *Pride of Hawaii* was also, by far, the largest and most expensive U.S. flagged passenger ship ever built when it was launched. And we were privileged to be aboard for what, I believe, was only its second or third cruise *ever*. In other words, it was brand new!

Besides the twelve hundred staterooms, and the usual assortment of pools and hot tubs; there was also a health spa and beauty salon; a fitness center; a jogging and walking track; a court for basketball, volleyball and tennis; one larger store and a smaller gift shop; a golf pro shop; a library; an internet lounge; a video arcade; a card room; three activity centers: one each for adults, kids, and teens;

a business center and meeting rooms; an absolutely *huge* theater (which cost over a million dollars just by itself); twelve bars; and last, but not least, even a chapel!

But the most conspicuous example of abundance on the ship was clearly the food which was available each day, all day, and for every conceivable taste and preference. For the eating pleasure of the approximately 2,400 passengers there were a total of ten different restaurants, including a steakhouse, another for seafood, as well as those specializing in Italian, Mexican, Asian, and French cuisine. And, as we were told, also counting the nearly twelve hundred crew members onboard, the chefs and kitchen staff prepared over 10,000 meals each and every day!

It was literally nonstop food. Even as big as the ship was – 965 feet long – or longer than three entire football fields – you still wondered where all that food kept coming from! Especially at the Aloha café on deck 12, which was buffet style and where the food was an endless stream. As soon as a tray or pan was emptied, another one immediately took its place. Anything and everything you could imagine; heaping portions that never ran out; and endless desserts, breads, rolls, fresh fruits, and salads. Not to mention pizza, hamburgers, and hot dogs every day for lunch and dinner. Believe me, no one went hungry, even the finicky eaters.

In fact, after we returned home I was afraid to step on a scale for two whole weeks! And even then, when I got dressed in the morning, I was reminded that my waist was now one belt notch larger!

Abundance... Food for thousands of people... Well, that's the theme of today's gospel passage as well, isn't it? But there's one big difference. Our experience of abundance on the *Pride of Hawaii* (Jeanette's and mine that is) had to do primarily with being the "recipients" of such abundance. Now, to be sure, that's

typically also how we interpret this morning's reading as well, isn't it? In other words, the miracle is often seen in terms of how all those people received food and were satisfied. But actually the theme of abundance in our text, I would argue, is portrayed and understood in a completely and entirely different manner.

Like *all* of Jesus' miracles in the Gospel of John, in fact, the feeding of the 5,000 was a so-called *sign* of something else, and an important teaching moment as well, although – as we'll see in a moment – the crowds just didn't get it. You see, the thousands who were fed, including and especially the disciples, were not merely the *recipients* of God's abundance, they were also, and primarily, I would argue, *participants* in God's abundance. Participants, not simply recipients. Here, let me show you what I mean...

The clues, in fact, are right there at the very beginning of our lesson. As we heard, a large crowd of people had followed Jesus because they had seen what he'd been doing for the sick; the healings and such. And they undoubtedly wanted some of that for themselves. And who can blame them? But again, that's a "recipient's mentality," isn't it?

So Jesus looks up and sees the crowd, and says to Philip, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" And here's the first clue: The gospel writer tells us that Jesus said this to test Philip, because Jesus already (quote) "*knew* what he was going to do."

Now this wasn't the kind of test intended to "trick" Philip, or "trip" him up somehow. No, this was a test of faith, a test to see if Philip "got it." To see if Philip understood the nature of God's grace and the abundance which flows from it.

Jesus already knew that he was going to feed these people. That was never in doubt. What's more, he also knew *how* he was going

to do it as well. The only real question, then, was whether Philip and the other disciples knew it, and then could also see how he proposed to do it.

But such was not the case, obviously, because Philip responds to Jesus' question by saying, "Six months' wages (!) would not buy enough bread for each of them to (even) get a little."

Now for the second clue... Philip has rather succinctly and definitively answered Jesus' question; pointing out the obvious. And immediately Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, pipes in with, "There's a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are *they* among so many people?" he adds. The implication here was obvious; that's hardly enough food.

Jesus, though, apparently ignored both of them, and simply told his disciples to make the people sit down. You see, the disciples just didn't "get it."

Then, Jesus took the loaves, gave thanks, and distributed them to those who were seated; so also then with the fish. And we are told that the people ate "as much as they wanted." Not a little. Not just a few bites. This wasn't hors d'oeuvres, or a little snack, but something more substantial, and as much as they wanted... In other words, "abundance."

Now some commentators argue that this wasn't a true meal, but rather some kind of a "precursor" to Holy Communion. And I suppose that's possible, but a little too "symbolic" for my taste (no pun intended). But, of course, this position doesn't really explain the presence of the fish or the absence of the wine either, does it? And it also kind of ignores the fact that these people were literally hungry, apparently *really* hungry, and then ate their fill.

Still other interpreters focus on the miraculous nature of the feeding; the fact that Jesus could somehow stretch these five barley loaves and two fish even further than Rachael Ray on the Food Channel can. And I suppose one could defend that position quite neatly and nicely by insisting that it was and still remains a mystery. And we'd be hard-pressed to prove them wrong.

But there's also a third possibility, isn't there? Perhaps the most obvious and logical one, at least to my way of thinking. Surely the mere fact that there was a boy standing by with those five barley loaves and two fish implies that there were probably others in the crowd who had brought along some food with them as well, doesn't it?

Try looking at it this way. Out of five thousand people, only *one boy* thought enough ahead to leave home with a picnic lunch? I sincerely doubt it. I believe that there were surely others who had also brought food with them that day. Maybe not all of them, perhaps, but enough of them. And maybe they all didn't bring a *lot* to eat. But, again, some of them undoubtedly did. After all, five loaves and two fish is quite a bit to eat for one boy, even if he *was* a growing one!

I remember being a skinny teenager myself, who was capable of eating constantly. Prompting those around me, on more than one occasion, to wonder if I had a tape worm!

In addition, I personally like bread as well. No, check that. I *love* bread, and I clearly went off the wagon, so to speak, while we were on our cruise and indulged my love of bread every chance I got, and at every single meal as well. I would even munch on a roll or slice of bread while I was walking around the buffet tables just strategizing on what I was going to eat *next*. But, again, as much as I love bread, even *I* couldn't eat five loaves at a single sitting!

And so the miracle, perhaps, wasn't so much about "making something out of nothing" (you might say), as it was simply getting the people, like that boy with the loaves and fish, to share what they had brought... with each other. So that everyone then could have "as much as they wanted."

In other words, the abundance God provides had been there all along. In fact, it always is. The trick, if you will, and most assuredly in our own day as well, is simply getting people to see it; to see God's abundance that's already in our midst, and to understand and to trust that God has always supplied us with everything we need.

I read just recently, for instance, that we have the capability of feeding every human being on this planet right now! The *problem*, if you will, is not having enough food. The problem is finding a way to get that food to all those who need it. Or, to put it another way, it's not a production problem as much as it is a *distribution* problem...

So now where is it that we find and see ourselves in this text? Is it merely the expectation that God will somehow miraculously fill our *own* needs abundantly? And, moreover, that we will receive such abundance if only we have sufficient faith? Just listen to much of the religious programming on TV these days, or read a sampling of the religious bestsellers at the bookstore, and that's exactly the message you'll hear. Yet is that really what Jesus was trying to say and demonstrate?

Like the disciples at first, the people, as we heard, didn't get it either. They didn't get what Jesus was trying to communicate to them. All they saw was a so-called "bread king," someone who could fulfill their every wish and desire like that proverbial genie in the lamp. And so just as soon as Jesus realized this, the fact that

they were about to come and take him by force to make him their king, he, of course, high-tailed it by himself up into the mountains.

No, it wasn't just about feeding people. And it wasn't about their being *recipients* of God's abundance either. It was actually about faith. Remember Philip's test? It was about people believing and trusting that God has already provided. All we have to do, Jesus was trying to point out, is be willing and faithful *participants* in God's abundance; that is, to simply acknowledge the abundance that is already *ours* and to willingly put that abundance to work in the world, without fear or reservation, whether it's to feed the hungry, or clothe the poor, or heal the sick, or shelter the homeless.

Or... as I would like to suggest to you this morning, to also grow and expand the ministry and outreach of Hope Lutheran Church. At a time when many, if not most, of the congregations in the ELCA are facing crippling deficits, and are forced to either cut staff or close their churches entirely, Hope's total income – from all sources, including and especially Hope Christian School – is nearly a million dollars! And even after all of our various bills are paid and commitments are met, we are still left with a surplus of a little over 115,000 dollars. Which begs the question, of course: How and where can we use this abundance to share God's word and serve others in God's name?

Tony Campolo, the well-known sociologist and popular Christian speaker tells the story of once flying back to Philadelphia, his hometown, on a red-eye from the West Coast. When he got off the plane at 8:30 in the morning, he was met immediately by his secretary who reminded him about a speaking engagement he had previously committed to, which was scheduled for that very day at ten o'clock. "I don't know how we missed this one," she said. "Somewhere along the line, the notices of this engagement must have fallen between the cracks. So that's why I'm here to meet your plane. You need to go directly to the church. It's one of

those World Day of Prayer services and you're supposed to deliver a 'missionary' message.”

As Campolo writes, “When I took my place behind the pulpit I wasn't thinking clearly, and I was too tired to be any place other than home in bed. (Having taken one of those red-eyes myself on our return from Hawaii, I know exactly how he felt!)

Anyway, Campolo went on to say, “Consequently, I did not react as I should have when the woman leading the meeting announced to those gathered that she had a prayer request from a missionary in Venezuela. She described a wonderful doctor who had given her life to serving the poor in the barrios of Caracas. This missionary doctor was asking for 5,000 dollars to put an addition onto her medical dispensary. The addition was desperately needed because with her present facilities she wasn't able to handle all the sick and infirm who came her way.”

The leader of the group then asked, “Dr. Campolo, would you please begin by leading us in prayer that the Lord might provide the 5,000 dollars that is needed by our sister in Venezuela?”

Before he could catch himself, however, the exhausted and sleep-deprived Campolo, said, “No! But what I *will* do is take all the money that I am carrying on me and put it on the altar. And I'm going to ask everyone else here... to do the same. No need to write out any checks! We'll only accept cash! Then after we've all put the cash we're carrying on the altar, we'll count it. And *then* I'll ask God to write out a check for the difference.” As Campolo noted, “It was a good day to pull this off, because I was only carrying \$2.25 on me.”

Well, the leader smiled benevolently at Campolo and said, “We've all gotten the point, haven't we?” And Campolo responded, “No!

I don't think we have! My \$2.25 is on the altar. Now it's *your* turn!"

She was somewhat taken aback by his aggressive request, but she nevertheless dutifully opened her wallet, pulled out \$110 and slapped it down on top of *his* meager offering. To which Campolo announced, "That's it. We're on our way! We've got \$112.25." And then he looked out at the women in the congregation and said, "Now it's your turn!"

He then pointed to a woman who was sitting in the front pew to his right. She looked around and smiled nervously. Then she got up and went to the altar and put her cash on top of theirs. Then Campolo got the next woman to do it, and the next, and the next. It took more than 25 minutes to take up the offering as, one by one, woman after woman went up and placed her money on the altar. When they all had finally finished taking turns, he counted the money. They had taken in more than 8,000 dollars!

Even then, Campolo writes, "I knew I hadn't gotten all of the cash. I could see some of the women putting in meager offerings, holding back most of what they had and giving me dirty looks."

Well, it took so long that there wasn't any time left for Campolo to preach. "I don't think they wanted to hear from me anyway," he wrote. "So I simply said to the congregation, 'The audacity of asking God for 5,000 dollars, when he has already provided us with more than 8,000 dollars. We should not be asking God to supply our needs. *He already has!*'"

There is great abundance in this congregation of ours. Not *our* abundance, mind you. But *God's* abundance. And I'm not just talking about money either. We are blessed in so many ways. And yet... we so often think that the very opposite is true.

In fact, the typical response of many Christians, and many congregations, is this instead: “We have so little. It’s not nearly enough. What can we possibly do?”

All the while, we’re missing the point. It’s not about what we have individually. Rather, it’s all about what we have collectively. God’s abundance, you see, is a *shared* abundance and, as such, it’s also *meant* to be shared.

As Tony Campolo himself suspected at that World Day of Prayer service, I even wonder if the abundance we enjoy here at Hope is actually *everything* that God has blessed us with? In other words, is there even *greater* abundance available to us that remains, as yet, untapped? Even greater abundance that can be used to further the work of God’s kingdom.

Here’s the bottom-line truth: There will never be an experience of abundance in our lives if we all cling so tightly to what we’ve been given. True abundance is only recognized and experienced when we open our hands, and our arms, and our hearts, and, yes, even our wallets and pocketbooks, and let God’s abundance pour out.

As the apostle Paul wrote at the conclusion of our second reading this morning: “Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish *abundantly* far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

Amen indeed!

