

Dedication Sunday

May 5, 2019

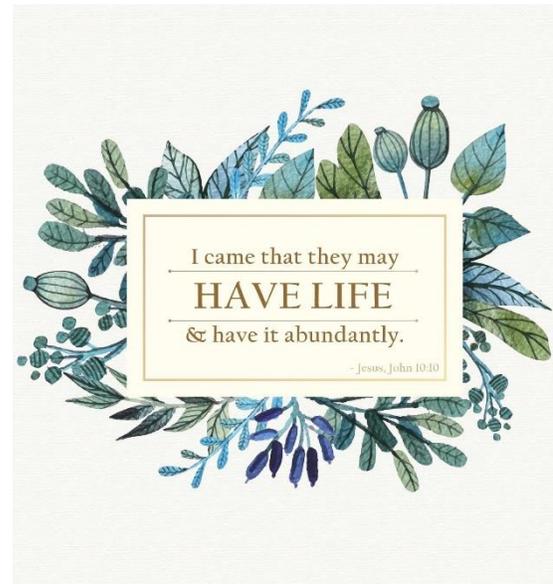
Dr. Susan F. DeWyngaert

**John 6:1-13**

**1 Peter 4:8-11**

**A Life that Matters**

*Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. - 1 Peter 4:10*



What a magnificent story! We've heard it so often. Perhaps it's lost some of its impact for you and me.

Woods pilgrims visited The Church of the Multiplication where Jesus is thought to have performed the miracle of the Loaves and Fishes. It's on the north shore of the Sea of Galilee. Looking up at the hillside and the lush, green space, it's easy to imagine Jesus teaching there until late in the afternoon, losing all track of time.



This is the church with the famous 5th century mosaic of the loaves and fishes. The art survived a terrorist attack.



In 2015 Jewish-Israeli extremists set fire to the Church of the Multiplication and scrawled anti-Christian graffiti on the walls.

The church reopened in 2017 but the crime went largely unreported.

It is very important for Christians throughout the world to support the Christians in the Middle East and elsewhere who are facing persecution. Yesterday *Newsweek* had a follow up report on the Easter Sunday church bombings in Sri Lanka. In it they quoted the U.K Foreign office saying that in some regions - such as Pakistan and Nigeria - “the level and nature of religious violence and persecution is coming close to the UN definition of genocide.”<sup>1</sup>



It is similar to the situation of the first-century Christian church. Our theme verse for this year’s stewardship emphasis comes from the first letter of Peter to a church facing state-sanctioned persecution and murder of Christians by the Roman Empire. The author writes to remind the believers that God is with them. He counsels them to stay strong, and gives them wise and practical instructions from the fourth chapter of 1<sup>st</sup> Peter, beginning at verse 8:

*Above all, maintain constant love for one another, for love covers a multitude of sins. Be hospitable to one another without complaining. Like good stewards of the manifold grace of God, serve one another with whatever gift each of you has received. Whoever speaks must do so as one speaking the very words of God; whoever serves must do so with the strength that God supplies, so that God may be glorified in all things through Jesus Christ. To him belong the glory and the power forever and ever. Amen.*

The word of the Lord. Thanks be to God. Let’s pray together:

Giving God, teach us to be more generous. Teach us to serve you as you deserve. We pray on behalf of believers of all faiths who struggle to remain constant in difficult circumstances. You have called *us* to follow your Son, Jesus. You’ve asked us to come after him, to follow without counting the cost. Send us your Holy Spirit. Give us courage and wisdom to be a faithful and effective church. In his name we pray. Amen

I want to live a life that matters. You do too; I know. In fact, I don’t know anyone who is content just to take up space on the planet. We each want this one, wild and precious life to count. We want to welcome Christ’s kingdom, now and for the future of our children and grandchildren.

So we come offering the gifts God has entrusted to us back to God, as the 9:30 Call to Worship says to...

Discover the magnificent things God has done. ...  
To be reminded of God's love for us  
To hear the promises made so long ago,  
by the One who repairs all our brokenness,  
who reshapes our world.

Do you think the world needs that kind of transformation? So do I! We need it today! It is God and God alone who has the power to reshape us after the image of Christ. There are promises here, possibilities that you and I need to claim! Yes?

The story that the lector just read for us - the Feeding of the 5000 - is the only one of Jesus' miracles recorded in all four gospels.

It's Passover, and people are traveling through Galilee. On the lakeshore Jesus begins to teach them. As the afternoon passes into evening, human need sets in. There are thousands of people there - 5,000 men, in addition to the women and children.

Have you ever had to feed 5,000 plus people? I have, and believe me, it's tough. Carolyn Watkins can do it, but for mere mortals, it's brutal. Many years ago I was co-chair of the Jimmy and Rosalynn Carter Habitat Blitz Build in Charlotte, North Carolina, aka, "The Miracle on 19<sup>th</sup> Street." We built 14 houses in a week. Bob Hope was one of the volunteers. I'm not kidding. I was so nervous -- all my pictures of that week have my fingers in them.

People came from all over to Charlotte to work in the July sun, thousands of them, local people and busloads from all across the country. My team and I had to feed all of them! That's when I learned what kind of generosity is possible in churches and what happens when we work together, how we can support each other.

We organized it kind of like Winter Relief. Churches and synagogues brought food. Some of it showed up at the wrong time; some of it went to the wrong place, but somehow everyone was fed. My favorite memory from that time was the dedication ceremony. I got to sit next to Former President Carter. My 2-year-old kept escaping from her dad's arms and trying to climb up on the platform. The Secret Service did not like that.

It took our team a year and a half to coordinate it all. Jesus does it in a moment, in the middle of nowhere, with no Costco, nothing close at hand. He scans the crowd and asks *his* leadership team: *Where are we going to get bread to feed all these people?* Now, he knows where, but he wants to see if they know. It's part of their journey of discipleship. He's calling them to make their lives count, to be part of the solution in meeting human need.

This is not just a question for the first disciples. The Bible's truth isn't just about what happened long ago. It's also about us. How are we going to do his work to meet the needs that are right in front of us?

The first disciple to respond to Jesus' question is Philip. Philip says, "This is impossible. We can't do it; it's too big. We don't have enough of anything to "feed" all these people. And I wonder if he's talking about feeding them physically or spiritually? Both, I guess.

Philip thinks it can't be done. His response is kind of like what we say in our worst moments; it's a response of scarcity. Scarcity thinking says, "There's never enough." "We've already pared the budget back so far, there's no way we're going to be able to do more." Scarcity thinking makes us selfish and competitive. On a global scale, scarcity thinking causes wars, persecution, and untold suffering. It causes us to look after our own needs and to ignore the call of God.

Thank goodness Andrew is there. He interrupts. "Ah, Jesus there's this kid over here. He has two fish and five little barley loaves, but that probably wouldn't go very far." There's a little bit of scarcity thinking in Andrew's response, in the "but." At the same time there's possibility thinking there too.

To be honest what this boy had wasn't much. The two fish were probably sardines or tilapia, that's what's in the Sea of Galilee. Barley bread was the cheapest, simplest kind. This little boy is poor himself. But here's the difference: Andrew saw an opportunity. While Philip's response is one of scarcity (there's not enough) Andrew's response is one of abundance (maybe Jesus can do something with this).

Andrew says, "Look what we do have!" Where Philip sees obstacles, Andrew sees possibilities. Where Philip sees little, Andrew sees much. Andrew thinks, "In the right hands this could really be something." That's what Jesus is always calling us to do – to believe in possibilities, gratitude, and abundance.

I wonder what the other disciples were thinking about this. Were they rolling their eyes at Andrew? Scarcity thinking does that; it makes us cynical. Scarcity thinking is so deeply ingrained in us that when we experience abundance thinking we bristle. We get hostile. Scarcity pits us against each other and reinforces the lie that it will never be enough. Or will it?

I love what happens next. Jesus tells everybody to sit down. There is a lot of grass in the area. We know it was spring because it was Passover. Spring is so beautiful and green in Galilee. Then Jesus takes this boy's offering, and he gives thanks. He gives thanks for this tiny gift. Have you ever imagined Jesus giving thanks for your offering? You better make it a good one!

Do you have a situation like this? You look at the problem, whatever it is, and it looks huge and your resources are so small. And you think, "Where do I even start?" Here's your answer. Start by giving thanks. Start by giving thanks for what you have! And then we're told that Jesus had his disciples distribute the food to those who were there – as much as they wanted, not a crumb or two –but enough. Our God provides for us – in abundance!

In a few minutes we are going to come to The Lord's Table and place our pledge cards here. You may think of that as just a piece of paper, a practical matter, but it's more. It's a chance for

you to count. It's your faith promise, your gift, and the possibility that maybe Jesus can really do something with this! He can.

As I was praying and preparing for today's worship, I got curious about that word abundance. How many times does the Bible say this? So I looked it up: 113 times. One hundred and thirteen times the Bible tells us: Our God provides abundantly for us – abundant love, abundant grace, abundant hope, abundant gifts, and abundant opportunities to share. As you come today to offer your faith promise to God, remember C.S. Lewis' axiom:

“It is only when we realize that everything we have, and in fact, everything we are comes from God and belongs to God, only then can God begin to truly work in us.”

Before I close today I want to tell you about Suzanne. I've changed her name although she gave me permission to share her story.

She surprised me one day when she said, “I'm going to quit the church; I have to; I just can't afford it anymore.”

What? I couldn't believe what I was hearing. Suzanne had been a member of the church for years. This was one of the churches I served in Florida. Her 3 kids were active in the youth ministries. The family loved the church. She knew the church didn't have dues.

“Financially we're having a rough time,” she said, “Their dad has stopped paying child support.” I knew he worked on commission. The recession hit that community very hard.

At first she was matter-of-fact. “I can't pledge, and I won't be one of those moochers who let other people carry them along. I've always done my part.” That was when her composure broke. She put her face in her hands. “Some weeks I can't even afford the gas to come down here.”

We sat together for a while and we prayed. I told her that the church had gas vouchers through that church's equivalent to our Cecelia McKay Fund. But she still wasn't budging on the idea of quitting. From childhood she'd been taught to give God the First Fruits, her best. She said, “I just can't be here knowing that I'm not bringing my tithe. It makes me feel like a hypocrite.”

So we talked for a long time about what she did have. It was true that she didn't have cash, but there was a lot she did have. She had talents, energy, and volunteer hours that she gave generously. But there's a danger in thinking that we can substitute the gift of time for the gift of money when supporting Christ's church. When we separate God's ownership of our lives into two categories: “All this is God's – my time and my talents – all that came from God and belongs to God, but over here, this money, that's mine. I have to keep it because there isn't enough [scarcity].” She knew not to do that. Christ is either Lord of our whole lives or not at all.

What to do? We started by thanking God for what she did have: great kids, a job, an ex with whom she had a solid relationship. AND, as it turned out, she had a lot of stuff she didn't need, accumulation; you know how it is. She sold some things and brought the proceeds to God as her offering. It was kind of like that apostle named Barnabas in the reading from last week, and also

like the boy who gave Jesus his lunch. Suzanne assumed, and she was right, that things would improve. Eventually she got a better job; the housing market improved, and her ex-husband caught up on his child support. She even insisted on paying back the Emergency Fund. I really tried everything to talk her out of that. It's a gift; not a loan.

Over the years Suzanne taught me more and more about faith and integrity. She taught me how to recognize abundance. It's not always what you think. 1 Peter reminds us of the call of Christ to be *good stewards of the abundant grace of God, serving one another with whatever gifts we have*. We have so much, so much more than we think.

In the right hands, your gift and mine can really be something! It can change the world.

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<sup>1</sup>Shane Croucher "Persecution of Christians is approaching genocide levels report finds: Christianity 'is at risk of disappearing' *Newsweek*, May 3, 2019 <https://www.newsweek.com/persecution-christians-genocide-christianity-disappearing-report-1414038>