

Abundance
Isaiah 55:1-5, Matthew 14:13-21

Outside our Zambian hut, we eagerly examined the contents of our bucket, labeled AF for Africa. We found there several carrots, a few potatoes, two cooking pots, plates and utensils. We were RICH – comparatively speaking. You see, the refugees, just down the hill didn't even have a bucket to collect water in. Granted, ours had a swiftly-leaking crack, but we also had Josh Greene's ingenuity to deal with that. We were in good shape. All we had to do was barter for water with the Guatemalan Farm: they had a Habitat for Humanity-made house, but more important, they had access to the only well in the village. Once we had water, we could boil our carrots and bake our potatoes. Our meal would be bland and boring, but at least we knew we would eat that night.

This was a scene from our youth mission trip's experience of the Global Village one night at Heifer Ranch. The Global Village is a simulation of 8 individual homes from around the world. The various youth groups attending Heifer Ranch were placed in each world community by lottery. Resources such as food, water, firewood and cooking implements had been divided up depending on the country or situation each group was in. Some groups had very little. We were blessed to have a hut and some food in Zambia



Perhaps you can predict where I'm heading with this anecdote from my summer. Like the 5000-plus people sharing food with Jesus and the disciples, we had plenty to eat that night in the Global Village – and so did all other participants.

In fact, by the time our crew had finished cooking and realized that we had more than enough to spare,
even the refugees, who had started the day with nothing,
declined our extras because they were already full.

It wasn't 12 baskets of leftovers, but it was more than enough.



The account of the Loaves and Fishes has – like other miracle stories – many possible interpretations. Some readers would have it that the crowd, inspired by Jesus' compassion and the disciples' generosity, pulled out their own small "sack lunches", adding to what became quite a large "miracle": that "5000 men, besides women and children", were fed with a bit to spare. Others would posit that the feast was of spiritual food, a soul-sustaining precursor to the Last Supper. The parallels are clear in Matthew's word choice: when it was evening, taking the 5 loaves, he blessed and broke the loaves and gave them to the disciples, and all ate.

Yet others accept the miracle at face value: people were hungry – Jesus fed them. What NONE would argue is the importance that early Christians placed on the miracle. After all, it is the ONLY miracle to have made it into ALL 4 GOSPELS. Not only that, but this story is told SIX separate times... a little differently in each, but 6 tellings in all. Apparently it was quite significant to our Christian ancestors.

...Is it still?

In a recent *Christian Century* magazine there is an article that reminds preachers of the purpose of our preaching:

The point is not to make up a new story each week,
the author insists, but to repeat again and again one story,
the Christian story,
the story of God's presence in our lives,
particularly through Jesus Christ.

The repetition of this story is not to *entertain*, but to *sustain*.ⁱ

So, regarding the feeding of the 5000:

If we continue to repeat this story that the early Christians also repeated, then there must be something *sustaining* about it. Well, of course it's sustaining – it's about FOOD...sustenance.

Food is something we all understand.

Food of all types is an image we find quite often in the Bible. Even if I stick to *just* the theme of abundance there are several examples.

There is the connection to God providing manna to the wilderness-wandering Israelites, who, when they each collected for their own tents,
“they measured it...[and] those who gathered much had nothing over,
and those who collected little had no shortage”ⁱⁱ.
It was enough.

There is also the story from 2nd Kings in which,
during a famine and in opposition to all logic,
the prophet Elisha states that the small portion of
available food would be plenty,
and according to the word of the Lord,
all “shall eat and have some left”ⁱⁱⁱ.
Again, it was enough.

This same theme of food resonates with us even today.

As we gather for potlucks here at Plymouth
we are meeting for the food, yes –
but also *for the work of the church*,
for the *community* it builds and
for the *spirit of togetherness* in the breaking of bread.

Only ONCE have I experienced a potluck where we *almost* ran out of food ...
yet there were still PLENTY of desserts.

It was enough.

Food as an image of abundance is one we *get*!

Just think about Thanksgiving dinner.

Or of the wide open table of the Great Thanksgiving, Communion.

We get it.

So when Isaiah offers the image of food as *spiritual* sustenance so extravagantly – “you that have no money, come, buy and eat!” – we respond.

But perhaps, in our society, the image of food as spiritual abundance achieves less impact than it did for Isaiah's hearers.

Unlike our biblical forebears, most of us have not experienced a time when food wasn't available; so when Isaiah uses the metaphor of food for spiritual feasting, we may miss out a little on his intended
intensity of pleasure,
on the overwhelming joy and well-being
that spiritual abundance affords.



So what is abundance?

Webster's dictionary calls it "an ample quantity", "plentifulness", and "wealth". Isaiah calls it "bread" and "that which satisfies", "what is good" and "rich food".

Spiritual abundance – a bounty of that which fulfills on the *deepest* level.

When I consider what fulfills me I think about the seemingly small things.

I am blessed to sing loudly and badly in my car, when nobody else can hear me or care what I sound like. That is fulfilling for me.

I am blessed to have people I love and who love me – even if they're not nearby.

I am blessed to have playfulness and, sometimes, even the willingness to be silly.

I am blessed to have a community such as Plymouth: to give myself to you and to have you support me – to have you hold me accountable – to push me and to let me try new things (like taking a week to know some of our youth).

I am blessed to have experienced the love of God in my life so that,
when I become anxious that just maybe

there isn't enough time or energy or whatever,

I know that God is rooting for me to make it,

to get back to recognizing that

all that I have named

is what makes my life good.

All of this is abundance for me.

What is it for you? When have you felt spiritually abundant? *With others or by yourself? At a certain time of year? When silent or singing?* How did you respond: what emotion or action? *Did you laugh or cry? Did you share it?* What can you do to hold on to that feeling? What can you do to create it?

Plymouth youth created it in the Global Village this summer.

The simple food we had received in our bucket would, of course, sustain our bodies; but the obvious intent of the Global Village challenge was that we SHOULD trade our goods for others, especially in light of the fact that the Urban Slum housed 60-some people to our 10 – and they had far less food.

Could we afford to share?

It would be costly to lose the filling potatoes.

What would it earn us to be good neighbors when what we had was sufficient?

Sufficient, but not *abundant*.

Because it was simply sufficient, we felt that anything we had we needed to protect, to keep for ourselves because, if it were gone, where would we get more?

...But then, as we slowly let go of a few carrots here and traded some potatoes there, we found that our bland and boring prospects became a feast of stew and cornmeal cakes.

In the words of the prophet Isaiah, we were able to delight ourselves in rich food, both literally and spiritually. It was to our benefit that we let go of what we were clinging to and opened ourselves to more. So much more.

Suddenly we were surrounded by abundance – we had more than we needed and more pleasure than anxiety.

As all the villagers finished eating – all having given and received – there was an amazing urge to celebrate.

At one point Marty and I looked around and half of our youth were gone ... but there was a great noise of music and laughter coming from the urban slum, of all places, so we knew where they had gone.

Our carrots and potatoes were traded for a joy of living. We were fulfilled – spiritually abundant.

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Most of us have a carrot and a potato.

We have a vehicle to get to work or to the grocery store.

We have a roof over our heads.

We have a church where we can be ourselves and seek our individual paths in community.

We have food and the necessities of life.

The necessities – a carrot and a potato.

But wouldn't we rather have stew and cornmeal cakes?

Doesn't God *provide* stew and cornmeal cakes?

*This* is the spiritual abundance that Isaiah is offering – “why do you spend money for that which is not bread, and your labor for that which does not satisfy?”

*This* is the food that Jesus offered to the crowd – “no one need go away or search elsewhere – their sustenance is available right here”.

There is enough – more than enough.

Ho! Everyone who thirsts, *come* to the waters;

And you that have no money, *come*, buy and eat!

May it be so.

<sup>i</sup> “Stick to the Story” by Richard Lischer in *The Christian Century*, July 26, 2005, p. 10

<sup>ii</sup> Exodus 17:18

<sup>iii</sup> 2 Kings 4:43