

## ***Abundance and Compassion***

### **Psalm 145:8-9, 14-21; Matthew 14:13-21**

A couple stands before a pastor and, in the service of marriage promises to love one another "in sickness and health, in riches and in poverty, for better or worse" – in other words, promises to love one another with everything they've got.

Is this wise? Is it wise to love with such extravagance, to hold nothing back, to love without limit, "until death us do part"? Ought not the bride and the groom hold something back? Ought not they carefully consider just how much love they can muster for one another and yet still maintain their cherished individuality?

No, says the church. Go ahead, love with unbridled enthusiasm and extravagance. Love is a renewable resource. In giving you receive, when it comes to love.

Maybe love is a spendthrift. Maybe love isn't good at arithmetic. Jesus has been doing much good. He is exhausted and he has withdrawn to a deserted place. But by the time he arrives, word has spread and the place is anything but deserted. There is a great crowd. Jesus somehow summons up even more compassion. Matthew says he "had compassion for them and cured their sick." It grows late. The people are hungry, and the disciples recommend sending the multitudes away. Jesus commands his disciples to feed the hungry multitudes. The disciples ask, "Where on earth, with these scant resources, where are we expected to find food for so many? Five loaves, two fish – that's no match for so great a multitude. Here is the tension that can only be resolved through some fresh, miraculous, powerful intervention. After all, it is not like they can call up pizza delivery or run down to the nearest carry out. Remember, Jesus had gone to a deserted place to rest and the crowds follow him. The tension is that Jesus had compassion and came to the crowds to heal them, against the better judgment of the disciples, and now, when they are hungry, Jesus, in compassion, directs the disciples to feed them! So Jesus takes what seems like terribly meager resources in hand, and there is enough. In fact, there is an overabundance of food.

Scarcity in the face of great need is contrasted here with the gracious, extravagant abundance that is offered at the hand of Jesus. We note that the story does not simply end with "and all ate" (v. 20), which would be miraculous enough in itself. Matthew reports that "they all ate and were filled." They were fulfilled, satisfied, not temporarily assuaged.

"Let's ask Molly to take on this job," said one of the members of the planning committee. "Molly always does such a good job on anything she undertakes." There's wide-spread agreement in the group.

I, as her pastor, said, "Now, do you really think this is fair to Molly? Molly already has two or three jobs in the church. She is one of our busiest members, one of our hardest workers."

"That's just my point," said the chairperson. "Everybody knows, if you want a job done right, always ask the busiest person to do the job. Busy people always seem to be the people who are able to find time to do even more."

"I love my family; I would do anything in the world for my family." You often hear folks say that. But that's not saying much. After all, our family looks like us. We parents have much of our own egos tied up in our children. But I know parents who are able to love even beyond the boundaries of their own kith and kin.

"Pastor, we decided to adopt the foster child we've been keeping, such a dear little thing. The parents have given him up for adoption, and we think that we ought to do it," she said.

And I, as the ever-cautious pastor, asked, "Do you really think that's wise? You already have three children. You are a great mother, but don't you think there are limits? Aren't there limits to how much love you can give?"

"When it comes to love," she said, "I haven't yet found the limits. From my experience, love feeds on love; it grows by being given away. The more love you give, the more love you seem to have. That's how it's been in my experience."

And you know, she's right!

Remember the story Jesus told about a farmer who sows too much seed. Most of the seed was wasted, falling on the wrong sort of soil. But when you are sowing good seed in bad soil, well, sometimes you have to overdo it a bit. The seed that did manage to germinate and take root and produced, said Jesus, abundant harvest.

Or in John 2: The wine gives out at a party after a wedding, and what does Jesus do? He turns water to wine! Not just some water into a bit of wine. He makes, according to John's estimate, about 180 gallons of the best tasting wine they ever had. He didn't just turn water into wine, which would have been quite a sign in itself. He made 180 gallons of wine! An abundance!

And so Jesus said, at the end of that series of stories about parties, that when just one sinner comes home, turns and repents, just one, heaven throws a huge party. So many parties! You know how expensive a party can be here on earth. Imagine what good catering costs in heaven! Extravagant!

Jesus told stories of such abundance and extravagance overflowing. God is like that. God could have made one shade of flower – say a red poppy – and this would be miracle enough for most of us. And yet, look at the colors and the shapes of the millions upon millions of flowers. Wouldn't you call such colorful creativity excessive?

And all the rich panoply of races, all the colors of people, all the diversity of shape and size, of sound and sense. Oh, let other gods be miserly, cautious, careful, but our exuberant Creator overdoes almost everything. Ours is a God who, when he started creating people or

flowers or birds or stars, just didn't know when to stop. Perhaps, with God, creativity is a renewable resource, kind of like love.

I know people, who have faced crisis upon crisis, and still they get back up and they ask for more. They suggest to me that courage, determination, maybe like love, may be a renewable resource.

"But what have you got?" Jesus asks.

And we look – nothing here but a few loaves, a couple of miserable little cold fish; and Jesus takes what we have, he blesses it, he breaks it, he gives it. And, wonder of wonders, it's enough!

No, Matthew says, "All ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, 12 baskets full."

See, the thing was, there wasn't just enough. There was more than enough. That is a lesson for us, with God, there is always abundance. Amen.