

Call to Worship

We have a generous and gracious Creator God. We come now to hear and to be reminded of God's powerful presence that sustains our lives. **We have chosen to embrace the gifts our Creator has given us and the awareness that God is the source of strength and hope in the world.**

May we be awakened to new understandings of God's urgency to share all that is provided as we choose to follow in the knowledge of God's love. **Come Holy Spirit and open our eyes and our hearts to the abundance we receive from God.**

Prayer of Invocation

We sense you, God, in the present tense. Break down whatever false defense has kept you at bay, without delay. Stay. A ray of light is shining in the darkness, and defining what is right, for all are precious in your sight. Abide with all, against the fall of night, until at last the world is right. Amen.

The Word

Matthew 14:13-21

Feeding the five thousand: When Jesus heard about [the death of] John, he withdrew in a boat to a deserted place by himself. When the crowds learned this, they followed him on foot from the cities. **When Jesus arrived and saw a large crowd, he had compassion for them and healed those who were sick. That evening his disciples came and said to him, "This is an isolated place and it's getting late. Send the crowds away so they can go into the villages and buy food for themselves."**

But Jesus said to them, "There's no need to send them away. You give them something to eat." **They replied, "We have nothing here except five loaves of bread and two fish."**

He said, "Bring them here to me." He ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. He took the five loaves of bread and the two fish, looked up to heaven, blessed them and broke the loaves apart and gave them to his disciples. **Then the disciples gave them to the crowds. Everyone ate until they were full, and they filled twelve baskets with the leftovers. About five thousand men plus women and children had eaten.**

Living the Word

God made and relates as Creator to the world and humanity. That relationship is all that the creation needs, for God is the source and the sustainer of all life, strength and hope. God's creative abundance is a gift to all and a relationship with all.

Abundance is the natural condition of all creation. It is a God-given mentality and behavior that humans can choose. (repeat) Author Henri Nouwen offers examples of abundance in his daily meditation from May 6, 2012: "There is enough for everyone, more than enough: food, knowledge, love...everything. When we see hungry people we give them food...when we encounter people in need of love, we offer them friendship...When we live with this mindset, we will see the miracle - that what we give away multiplies... There will even be many leftovers."

The Bible demonstrates abundance from the first chapter of Genesis on. Genesis 1 declares God's abundance, generosity, and the blessing and fruitfulness of creation. Each day God created and each day God declared it good. Exodus 16 (4-7) displays God's presence and love for God's people through the giving of Manna in the wilderness.

"Then the LORD said to Moses, "I'm going to make bread rain down from the sky for you. The people will go out each day and gather just enough for that day. In this way, I'll test them to see whether or not they follow my Instruction. On the sixth day, when they measure out what they have collected, it will be twice as much as they collected on other days." So Moses and Aaron said to all the Israelites, "This evening you will know that it was the LORD who brought you out of the land of Egypt. And in the morning, you will see the LORD's glorious presence, because your complaints against the LORD have been heard."

So what do you think the people did? Continuing on (16:15-20). *"Moses said to them, "This is the bread that the LORD has given you to eat. This is what the LORD has commanded: 'Collect as much of it as each of you can eat, one omer [about 2 quarts] per person. You may collect for the number of people in your household.'" The Israelites did as Moses said, some collecting more, some less. But when they measured it out by the omer, the ones who had collected more had nothing left over, and the ones who had collected less had no shortage. Everyone collected just as much as they could eat. Moses said to them, "Don't keep any of it until morning." But they didn't listen to Moses. Some kept part of it until morning, but it became infested with worms and stank."*

Matthew 14 begins with the story of Herod's birthday party for himself. He had married his brother's wife against the warnings of John the Baptist. When his new step-daughter/niece danced at the party, he offered her anything from his kingdom and she asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. So it was done. Herod's use of power was destructive and defensive. This story is immediately followed by the feeding of the 5000 by Jesus. Jesus' power is live-giving and beneficial.

Take a moment and in your mind describe your experience of God's abundance in your life (pause). If you could tell a story or draw a picture of abundance, what would it be? (Pause). God multiplies the blessings as we combine and share them. There is a simple song that goes like this: *"Love is something if you give it away; give it away; give it away. Love is something if you give it away, you end up having more. It's just like a magic penny; hold it tight and you won't have any. Lend it, spend it and you have so many, they roll all over the floor. For, love is something if you give it away, you end up having more."*

Abundance represents God's economy. God gives more than one loaf – it is enough bread for everyone. God distributes what we need. God's grace and activity is sufficient from beginning to end, from prevenient grace – God's unconditional love that was there before we even knew about it - to sanctifying grace – the unconditional love we share as we know there is always an abundance of love through God.

But abundance goes beyond thoughts of having enough or having what is sufficient. Abundance mentality captures God's presence and power, and so it leads us to hope. What is your first thought to the idea that abundance is 'the natural condition of all creation?' (Repeat)

Back to the Creation Story: originally, the Garden of Eden was given to humanity as a lush and lovely place to be. Humanity was originally given an abundance of all that was needed and more. Can you frame in your mind that God's economy is for us to have that kind of abundance? and that it is us

that denies it to ourselves by how we choose to live our lives! In spite of God's glorious abundance, humans deny the gift and choose to live in scarcity. Scarcity is a false condition that says the land and everything with it belongs to the people, not to God. Through the lens of scarcity, we see reality as divided and broken up – pieces over which to fight. Choosing to live in a condition of scarcity forms our attitudes mentality and our behavior.

Another quote from Nouwen – “as fearful people we are inclined to develop a mindset that makes us say: “There’s not enough food for everyone, so I better be sure I save enough for myself in case of emergency,” or “there is not enough love to give to everybody, so I’d better keep my friends for myself to prevent others from taking them away from me.”...The tragedy, however, is that what you cling to ends up rotting in your hands.

We all get caught up in it. Look what happened last Spring when we panicked because of the virus. How many of you have taken or been tempted to take more than your usual amount of something like toilet paper in the last year? Then it was hand wipes, and then eggs, and now it seems it can be anything week to week. Last week I was tempted to get 2 pounds of butter, even when I still had one pound in the freezer. Because three weeks ago that shelf was empty!

This last year the Bible Study Class has spent a lot of weeks and months studying what the desert supplies for those who live there: Water, green grass for the sheep, Broom trees for the goats, and a small garden plot in the ‘promised land to grow ‘just enough’ olives, grapes and figs to support their family each season.

Four years ago, when I came as your Pastor, the church finances were not in a good place, even so, church decisions were made to keep going with a new pastor. I spent the first year encouraging you until we got back in the black. The next two years I tried to protect you and the funds. It is good to be prudent and wise when it comes to money, but we don’t have a frugal and stingy God. I kept thinking we need to do small projects, one at a time when it comes to the church, so we don’t have to ask you for more money.

Through the MCCI program, I was then reminded the history of this original building, paid for, the large addition only a decade and a half later, almost paid for, and God pushed me to invite you to come together and pay off the mortgage. I was hesitant, though I tried to put on a ‘We can do this!’ attitude. Inside I was thinking “Anything we get and pay toward the goal is more than we had...” You came through in so many ways, even ahead of schedule for the 35th Anniversary! It is God’s church, entrusted to you and to me. It is not my church to protect. We will care for God’s people together when we live into the abundance we have been given.

I miss the jingle of the change in the offering plate each week. Yet I have to say that this church has come through for the quarterly projects with funds added to their regular giving. As well as, the matching funds for the Food Shelf in July and the School Supplies in August and it goes on and on.

Every time another project that needs us, comes to our door, I pray, “Lord, can we add another project. It seems like we always have a lot before the people.” Do you know what God sends back? “Cathy, you are the one who keeps telling the people it is just another opportunity. They will have the choice of what they want to give and to whom.” So OK, God, I am going to keep praying for your abundance to overflow where you want it to go. We do not have to pick scarcity. We do have a choice. We can choose God’s Abundance with all of its blessings. The choice is ours: Scarcity or

Abundance; Self-Reliance or Reliance on God; Consumerism or Generosity; Negativism or Positivism; Fear or Respect, Curiosity and Love.

Theologian Walter Brueggemann writes that the conflict and choice between abundance and scarcity is our defining problem. This conflict calls us to make a decision, one that dominates our whole lives. We can be “torn apart by the conflict between our attraction to the good news of God’s abundance and the power of our belief in scarcity.” [The Myth of Scarcity, Christian Century, 3-24-99]

God’s abundance: Get it, Grab it, Reach for it. *The Creation of Adam* is a fresco painting by Michelangelo, forming part of the Sistine Chapel ceiling, painted circa 1511–1512. The image of the near-touching hands of God and Adam has become iconic of humanity. Every time I see it, I am struck by how much God is reaching for Adam and how little Adam is responding. It is beautiful in all of its glory, but the story it tells is one of the human condition with God.

The blessings are within reach, do you want a part of it? 10,000 reasons for your heart to sing.... It is there...you have to want it enough to reach for it, and grow it. That is why we celebrate mission and service. We need to choose abundance – in language, attitude and behavior. For our own joy and peace, we need to choose sharing over hoarding, generosity over greed, hospitality over selfishness. For the sake of the creation, God calls us to choose wisely and to bring about a positive, cultural change.

This is a matter of choosing a ‘possibility’ mentality; asking what is possible rather than what is wrong. God has given each of us gifts, promises, and possibilities. We can choose to identify, embrace and live into those, living in personal holiness. God has given also to the church community many gifts, assets and strengths. As the church we can identify and build on those, living in social holiness. God’s people can transform the Church and the world into what it really is and was always meant to be: God’s abundant garden.

We demonstrate God’s abundance in all and for all, in practical ways, beginning with language – saying that we can do this thing, or that we can become that, or that we have all of the resources that we need to be faithful and blessed. Language can be inclusive, positive and spiritual, embracing all communities. Abundance in thought, language and attitude – these human resources lead us...material and financial resources follow.

Our communities can share human and material gifts and generate enough for all. With positive leadership, it is possible to witness to, nurture and serve with our neighbors. We can extend our giftedness to all the world, our entire community, to the land and everything in it.

We can imitate God in hearing and responding to the cry of the needy. We can take what we have – ourselves, our gifts, our witness, our wealth – and share it fully. Through our church and our United Methodist connection, we can give all we can, and then stand amazed at what God will do with us and through us and our gifts. So let’s look forward to all that God has planned for us, without worrying as to how we can do whatever that is. There is a place for each of us to use our abundant gifts for the good of the world and by doing that to share all of the blessings we have received.