

Mark 6:30-44
March 14, 2021

Hope Mennonite Church
Lent 4, Year B

Practicing God's Plenty

We are God's people. We are formed by God's story. And God's story is a story of

abundance.

Occasionally in life, we experience **abundance.**

When I was a boy, my dad and I and his friend and son took a small boat out on Egg Harbor Bay, New Jersey coast. We anchored and shut off the engine. All we could hear was the wind, the scolding of gulls, and the slap of waves against the boat. I learned how to stand on a rocking hull.

We had no GPS ... no sonar ... no chum. We baited hooks and dropped them over the side. Now honestly, what we expected was ... cold drinks, conversation, enjoying the bay, and **maybe** a catch or two.

Within seconds, each of us felt a hard tug on the line and heard a sharp **zing**. It was **sheer surrendipity**. We had anchored right over a whole school of puffer fish. We began dropping lines and pulling in fish as fast as we could rebait hooks. After a while I looked over at my friend. He had stopped using bait. The fish were biting ***on bare hooks!*** Eventually, the four of us were standing shin-deep in over 150 scratchy, flapping, inflatable ichthoids, which we had caught in two hours. The reason that memory is so vivid for me is that no other fishing trip ever came close to that ***phenomenal bounty***. Once in a while, we experience **abundance.**

When Carole and I were first married, we made a visit to Uncle Felix and Aunt Celia in Harrisonburg, VA. Uncle Felix was an avid gardener. But that year was different, and the **difference** had chosen Uncle Felix's **one** Italian plum tree.

Soon after we arrived, Uncle Felix took us out to see his tree. On the way we passed several full peck baskets of beautiful plums—deep indigo skin, powdered with baby-blue dust. Right then, it didn't register with me that **all** those plums came from **one** tree.

Then we arrived at Uncle Felix's Italian plum. It was shocking. The branches had to be supported by an elaborate system of ropes and wires and **crutches** that Uncle Felix got at the thrift store. That's because the branches were so heavy with fruit they were breaking. And the plums

themselves seemed to be growing in an unusual way ... not as individual fruits, but in big clusters like grapes. I never saw anything like it.

Uncle Felix and Aunt Celia couldn't give away plums fast enough. They took them to work and to church. Their neighbors saw them coming and locked the doors. We drove home with a huge box, while that dear old couple begged us to take more. Now that year in the Shenandoah Valley, the growing conditions were no different than usual. It was normal ... which did not prepare you for a backyard fruit tree on steroids.

We are God's people. We are formed by God's story. And God's story is a story of abundance.

God's story rises above all scarcity and limitation ... above all anxious uncertainty. **It's a story** where God is not fenced-in but wildly free and takes us along for the ride. **It's a story** that invites us, not to ration out our trust in bite-sized pieces, but ... to plunge with extravagant trust in God who is lavish in generosity.

The story that forms us is from the **23rd Psalm**: "The LORD is my shepherd. I shall not lack."

It's from **2 Peter 1:3**: "God's divine power has given us everything we need for life and godliness."

It's from **1 Corinthians 16:9**. Paul says, "A wide door for effective work has opened for me, and there are many adversaries." Even in adversity, God gives abundance.

The story that forms us is from **Luke 14**. Jesus says, "When you give a dinner, don't invite your friends or relatives or rich neighbors ... because they would do the same in return." What's wrong with friends or relatives or neighbors taking turns inviting each other to dinner? What's wrong with reciprocal hospitality? Jesus says, what's wrong is who gets left out. And who gets left out is anyone who can't return the favor. But ... when we live from God's plenty, nobody gets left out—as Jesus says, not the poor, not the disabled, not the lame, not the blind—nobody gets left out... because ... God doesn't operate out of balancing the ledger. God doesn't operate out of I'll scratch

your back and you scratch mine. **God's plenty** colors **outside** the lines of **reciprocity**. Jesus says ***God's pantry is always full ... for as many as have need (Luke 14:12-14).***

The story that forms us is about a tiny mustard seed that grows into a tree, and the birds come and build nests in the branches (***Matthew 13:31-32***). ***Never underestimate a mustard seed!***

We are God's people. We are formed by God's story. And God's story is a story of **abundance**.

And ***that story*** includes our Scripture today: Dinner on the lawn in an isolated place. Jesus provides **God's plenty**... **and** his disciples distribute it. And ***in the sharing with others***, there is **more**. That's not logical, is it? If you ***give away*** what you have, won't you have **less**? Answer: Not with **God's plenty**! Jesus show us that **God's reign** uses **the new math**, where **sharing** yields **surplus**. There's even **leftovers**: Twelve full baskets!

That's our story, friends. And you know what's even more fascinating? Jesus didn't **commend God's plenty** to people who **had plenty**. His dinner guests were ***Galilean peasants!*** **Those** are the ones to whom Jesus gives **God's story** of hope, growth, possibility, generosity, **abundance!** **Those** are the ones to whom Jesus says, "Don't be anxious. God takes care of the lilies and the ravens. And you're worth much more than they are." **Those** are the ones to whom Jesus says, "Good measure, pressed down, shaken together, **brimming over** ... will be poured into **your** lap" (***Luke 6:38***). Jesus says God's reign is ***an Italian plum tree on steroids!***

We are God's people ... formed by God's story. And God's story is a story of **abundance**.

Now we marvel at **God's plenty** at the big banquet on the green grass. But on this occasion, Jesus also **challenges** his disciples. He says to them, "**You** give them something to eat!" **God's plenty** happens when **disciples share** what Jesus gives them. What's it like when disciples like us put **God's plenty** into **practice**?

The early Dutch Anabaptist leader Leonard Bouwens spent 30 years of ministry running for his life. You know what else he did during that time? He baptized ... ***11,000 people!*** Why didn't the **limitations** stop him? Why didn't **fear** shut him down? He was **practicing God's plenty**.

Melita Goering was a frail old lady in a wheel chair with chronic pain. She used to pull me close and point upwards and say, “He’s got the whole world in his hands ... **and then some!**” What made Melita ***trust*** beyond her condition, ***trust*** that God had ***her*** and ***everyone*** ... **and then some**, in his hands? She was **practicing God’s plenty**.

One year at WDC assembly, we received a new church into membership ... a Hispanic congregation from Dallas. The church had 30 members. Out of those 30 members 13 of them had committed to making one contact every week, inviting a neighbor or coworker to their home for a meal and to church.

Thirteen people. What impact did they think they’re going to have on Metro-Dallas? What did they think they were going to invite people **to**? This church had no staff ... no budget ... no Sunday School ... no piano ... no hymnals ... **no building!** Why **didn’t** they see their **scarcity**? What made them understand themselves as people with **abundance** to share? They were **practicing God’s plenty**.

What made William Wilberforce believe he could convince the whole British empire to end slavery? He was **practicing God’s plenty**.

In **Mark 6**, Jesus feeds five thousand plus ... in **Jewish** Galilee with **Jewish** guests. **But** ... this is a story of **God’s plenty** and **God’s plenty continues** to grow.

So, in **Mark 7** Jesus meets a **non-Jewish** woman with a sick daughter. She pleads with Jesus to heal her child. Jesus says, “Let the **children** be fed first, for it’s not fair to take the **children’s** bread and throw it to the **dogs**.” With an **uncomplimentary metaphor**, Jesus turns away a desperate mother. His overall meaning is that his mission is only for the Jewish people.

But ... like the crowds in **Mark 6**, the **non**-Jewish mother in **Mark 7** is **not** easily dismissed. She comes back at Jesus, “Yes, Lord. Yet even the **dogs** under the table eat the **children’s** crumbs.” Yes, Jesus’ mission has a Jewish focus. Yet, she trusts that **God’s plenty** is **more**. And she’s willing to accept “scraps” to help her child. Jesus is impressed by the **faith** of this **non**-Jewish

woman. So, he makes an **exception** to the parameters of his mission and heals the non-Jewish child.

And ... the story **continues**. Next, Jesus heals a man who cannot hear or speak. It happens in “the region of the Decapolis,” that is, **non**-Jewish territory. Jesus makes **another exception** to the parameters of his mission. That brings us to **Mark 8**, where the exceptions will stop and things will get back to normal ... right?

Well ... in **Mark 8**, there’s **another** hungry crowd—4,000+ people. And Jesus is filled with compassion **for them**. Where does **this** take place—**Jewish** or **non-Jewish** territory? We don’t know for sure. **But** ... if it’s the latter, then Jesus has jumped from **one exception** to **two exceptions** to **over 4,000 exceptions**. As Jesus’ **compassion** grows, **God’s plenty expands exponentially**. In **Mark 6-8**, **way more** is **multiplying** than just loaves and fishes.

Dear friends, **God’s plenty** happens when disciples like you and me **share** what Jesus gives us. What would **practicing God’s plenty** look like in **your** life right now? What would **living from God’s abundance** look like for us at Hope Mennonite Church?