

First Presbyterian Church

Cheyenne, Wyoming

July 31, 2011

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Worship Theme: The Miraculous Power of God's Love

Gen 32:22- 31, Romans 9:1-5, Matthew 14:13-21

An English reporter was interviewing Mother Teresa of Calcutta:

“But Mother Teresa, doesn't it bother you that so many children come into the world unwanted?”

“Unwanted by whom?” asked Mother Teresa. “I feel sure that God wants them, for why else would he give us so many, and in all different colors, too? Do you want children?” she asked the startled reporter who immediately began to look very uncomfortable.

“Well, er, un, not exactly,” she replied.

“If you want a child, I can get you one,” Mother Teresa replied. “And it would be wonderful for you, who have no child to enjoy, to have a child since you have so much here in Europe, so much that you could share with a child. Just say the word and I will get you a child.”

And with that the interview came to an abrupt end.¹

When you read the Bible, particularly a story like today's gospel, you can see the old woman's point—there really does seem to be something about this God that tends toward excess, exuberance, and extravagance.

Jesus told many stories of such abundance and extravagance. 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. 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 fullness of races, all the colors of people, all the diversity of shape and size, of sound and sense. The exuberant creator overdoes almost everything. Here is a God, who, when he started creating people, animals, flowers, or stars, just didn't know when to stop. Perhaps, with God creativity is a renewable resource.

Look at today's gospel. Jesus receives the disturbing news that Herod has beheaded his cousin John the Baptist. In his grief or perhaps in fear of being next on Herod's platter, Jesus withdraws from the crowds that cluster around him, withdraws to a “deserted place.” Here in the middle of his ministry he returned to the place where he began his ministry—the desert. But the desert is anything but deserted. The huge crowd follows Jesus. They walked around the lake and into the wilderness to where Jesus is.

Jesus probably wanted to get a breather, a vacation from all those hurting people who were pressing in upon him. He probably wanted some time alone to cope with his own

¹ Pulpit Resource, W.H. Willimon, Vol. 33, NO. 3, Year A.

grieving and hurting, some time to contemplate what his enemies might be up to, but that's not what he got. Even out in the desert, beside the Sea of Galilee, there were thousands of people. At the sight of them, Jesus' heart broke. They were like sheep with no shepherd. So Jesus took pity on them and healed their sick. And we begin to hear the echoes of the 23rd Psalm:

*The Lord is my shepherd, I shall not want...
He leads me beside still waters; he restores my soul.*

Jesus spent all day speaking and teaching the people. Some of them understood and they received comfort and new direction for their lives and a new hope to calm their fears. Some remained skeptical; others were there gathering evidence against Jesus for the religious leaders. And the Psalmists voice repeats:

*He leads me in right paths for his name's sake.
Yea, though I walk through the valley of the shadow of death,
I will fear no evil; for thou art with me; they rod and they staff they comfort me.*

It grew late. The disciples urge Jesus to send the crowds away so that they can buy something to eat. Jesus tells the disciples, "You go and give them something to eat."

"Where in the world do you expect us to get enough to feed all these people? There must be at least five thousand of them out there," the disciples reply. "All we have are five loaves of bread and two fish."

Then, here in the desert, Jesus orders the crowd to sit down on the *green grass*. He takes the bread, blesses it, and tells his disciples to give it to the hungry crowd. And we hear the Psalmist:

*He makes me lie down in green pasture;
You prepare a table before me in the presence of my enemies;*

Everyone eats and is filled. Even more than that, they have twelve baskets of food left over. Food just overflows everywhere. And we are reminded:

You anoint my head with oil; my cup overflows

God's Divine abundance fed the bodies and souls of those who received the Word and sacrament that day. God filled them to an overflowing capacity with divine gifts. And all those who received came to understand that they were at home in the house of God for the rest of their lives.

*Surely goodness and mercy shall follow me all the days of my life,
and I shall dwell in the house of the Lord my whole life long.*

This story not only parallels the 23rd Psalm but it reveals to us a great deal about the miraculous power of God's love and the divine abundance with which we are sustained. And this story also says something about us. Although they were in the desert, the desert burst

into bloom once Jesus got there. There was acceptance of the outcasts, healing for the hurting, and food for the hungry.

The disciples are us. We look at the vast needs of the world streamed 24/7 onto our I-phones, TV's and into our newspapers and despair. "Jesus, send them away," we plead. "Jesus, work some kind of miracle and feed them."

Well, Jesus works a miracle all right. He asks us, "What do you have?" God has taken care of our needs. We don't have much, just a couple of fish in our basket and a few loaves of bread. But he urges us to take what we have and recklessly share it, give it away, and throw it away on the multitude.

And it is enough. It is more than enough.

"Pastor, we have decided to adopt the foster child that we have been keeping," she said. The pastor asked, "Do you really think that is 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 have not yet found the limits. From my experience, love is a renewable resource. The more love you give, the more love you seem to have. That's how it's been in my experience." She was right. Or as Bayard Taylor put it, "The loving are the daring."

Barbara Brown Taylor, an Episcopal priest and college professor, tells the story of nine teenagers from Vermont who went to a Navajo reservation out west for a week-long mission work project.

When they arrived, the Navajos pretty much ignored their presence. They didn't give them much of a welcome, nor did they offer to help them with any of the work.

It wasn't that the Navajos were hostile or rude. They just didn't believe that the kids would actually show up. And even when they did, they doubted that they could accomplish much of anything in one week. Besides, they had been promised all kinds of things before by previous work crews, but had seen only meager results at best.

They had good reason to be skeptical. However, these kids from Vermont and their adult sponsors were different. They didn't know how to do much—they didn't know how to build a sheep pen or put a new roof on a house—but they were determined to give it their best shot. And they did.

About halfway through the week, a funny thing happened. The Navajos, who up to that point had been watching from the sidelines, now began to pitch in. A group of Navajo teenagers decided to help fix up Annie Begay's Hogan. Apparently they figured that, if these kids could come all the way from Vermont to work, they could help, too.

At the end of the week, the youth from Vermont, their sponsors, and the Navajos who had joined the effort—all of them working together had completed forty-two of the forty-six projects they had set out to do.

Taylor concludes: “We went into the week skinny, with only five loaves and two fish; but we came out fat, with twelve baskets to spare. That’s because God made good to match our gifts...It’s something to remember when our own resources look too meager. How many loaves have you?”²

I think we come into this world with a sense of scarcity—a fear that there is not enough. I’ve got to grab, hoard, accumulate, pile up, and guard. “It’s mine and you can’t have it,” my two-year-old granddaughter Hannah quickly learned to say. We learn to be careful and cautious with what we have.

A Bible study group was talking about an ethical issue. There was heated debate over the “right” thing to do in this case, the “Christian” thing to do. Some of the group thought one thing, some another.

Toward the end of the discussion, Gladys piped up and said, “Should we be bothered that our main concern is to be so careful, so sure that we are doing the absolutely the right thing in this case? We’re Christians! We’re forgiven! We’re loved and forgiven by Jesus even if we don’t (and we probably won’t) do the absolutely, 100 percent sure right thing.”

I suppose that’s what Luther meant when he urged Christians of his day to “sin boldly.” It’s our puny, little, careful, cautious sins that mock the extravagant love of Jesus. Let bold, extravagant love be the measure of our actions.

Through Jesus Christ we come to see that God’s divine abundance is a miraculous gift of love and that love is an ever more renewable resource. The more you give it away, the more you have.

Today Jesus has led us to green pastures—gathered us here for worship and rest. He leads us today beside the still waters of the baptismal font. He restores our souls through word and sacrament and sends us forth along the right path. Jesus prepares this table for us and our cup overflows. God’s divine abundance anoints us and God’s love and mercy are upon us for we are the children of God and dwell in God’s house, forever.

When we learn to trust Jesus and when we learn to imitate some of his excessive, expansive, gracious actions we will stop guarding, hoarding, keeping, and clutching and we will show the openhanded gestures of generosity he meant for us to share.

We come into this world with a sense of scarcity, holding on tight. But by the grace of God we learn another way. We can see that all we have, and all that we are, is but a gift of an incredibly generous God who asks that we respond to our sisters and brothers in the same gracious, generous spirit. God simply asks of us, “How many loaves have you?”

² Story told by Barbara Brown Taylor, quoted by Richard Donovan in Sermon Writer.