**Manna in the Wilderness**

**Text: Exodus 16:15, 21**

**Preached by Bruce D. Ervin**

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The spirit of Our Future Story is reflected in on phrase: Reaching outward to connect people with God’s *abundance*. That’s what we do at First Christian Church.

Abundance! Stewardship has to do with celebrating God’s abundance. Stewardship has to do with *sharing* God’s abundance.

Abundance: It’s all of the amazing food that just seems to appear at a church supper.

Abundance: it’s the willingness of the women of the church to *prepare* all of that food.

Abundance: it’s an unexpected gift that arrives at the church just in time to launch a new ministry.

Abundance: it’s a bowl full of leftover Halloween candy because it was such a yucky night that almost no one came to the door. How many of you all had a lot of leftover candy on Thursday night? Ok, you can’t deny that we’ve all had a taste of God’s abundance!

We just heard a story about abundance. It’s the story of God’s gift of food in the wilderness, found in the 16th chapter of Exodus. The Israelites have been out in the wilderness for some time now, and they’re getting a little cranky. The journey is hard. Food is scarce. They’re thinking that maybe life in Egypt wasn’t so bad after all. “Sure we were slaves,” they seem to be saying, “but at least we had food!”

Moses, fearing a mutiny, appeals to God for help. He says, “Lord, what am I going to do with these people?”

And God says, “Listen, Moses, it’s not you, it’s me. Of course they’re cranky; they’re hungry! Tell you what I’m going to do. I will provide all the food that these people need. I’ll even deliver it by air mail: meaty birds in the evening and bread from heaven in the morning.”

The people knew what to do with the quail. They just pulled out their sling shots and picked-off a few. But breakfast was a bigger challenge. The looked out of their tents that first morning, and they saw this white, flaky stuff all over the ground. And they said, “What is it!?” Or, in Hebrew, “*Man hu*!?” It doesn’t take much for *man hu* to become *manna.* They ate manna from heaven. They ate *what is it* from heaven. Gathered it in each morning. They took just enough for each household. The bigger families got more, the smaller families got less, but everyone had enough. No one went hungry. They took just enough for each household, and just enough for eacy day. “Morning by morning they gathered it in, as much as was needed.” And morning by morning, God provided. Always.

*Bread from heaven*. Or, to put that more literally, *what is it from heaven*. To use that more literal phrase is to underscore the mystery of abundance. What is it, or *how* is it, that God always seems to provide? I don’t have an answer for that. I just know that it works. At least, it does when you don’t have wealthy oppressors or greedy caregivers or other crooks *syphoning off* what God has provided, it works.

The mystery of abundance. More often than not, it works. It works because God is good; all the time. And all the time; God is good! Awesome!!

You know what? I didn’t always believe it. The goodness of God, the mystery of abundance: none of it! I gave *lip service* to it. I *pretended* to believe it. But on a practical level, no way. Imagine that?! A preacher who didn’t really believe in the abundance and the goodness of God.

It wasn’t just me. Some of the Israelites didn’t believe it either. God is providing all of this meat and bread on a daily basis, and they still don’t believe it. We know this because there were folks in the wilderness who tried to set aside some of that bread; you know, just in case tomorrow, for a change, God didn’t deliver. Moses instructed them to gather enough bread just for that day, just that one day, trusting that the God of abundance would continue to provide, day after day after day. But the scripture says that in some households, “they did not listen to Moses; some left part of [the manna] until morning, and it bred worms and became foul” (Exodus 16:20). God invited them into joy and abundance. Instead, they chose fear and scarcity.

When we expect scarcity, we get scarcity. When we become afraid and we start to horde, we take some of God’s abundance out of circulation. There’s still enough to go around, but we’re holding some of it back. Thus we create the very scarcity that we fear. Decades ago, we had a so-called energy crisis. If you are of a certain age, you’ll remember the long lines at gas stations in the mid-1970’s. If you are not of that certain age, let me tell you about it. The Arabs reduced the amount of oil flowing to North America. And Americans, fearing scarcity, decided that every time they saw an open gas station, they had to fill-up. As a result, gas stations ran out of gas and long lines of cars formed at the gas stations that remained open. People were waiting for hours just to top-up their tanks. The thing is, even with the reduction in the gasoline supply, there was still enough to go around. There just wasn’t enough to go around *and* for everyone to always have a full tank. Some of that gas that you and I used to top-off our tanks should’ve been sitting there in the gas station for the next guy. When we fear scarcity, we create scarcity. In our fear, we hang on to more than we need, while someone else goes without. We can choose between fear and scarcity, or joy and abundance. God invites us into joy and abundance.

As I said, some of the Israelites didn’t believe in God’s abundance – didn’t *trust* in God’s abundance – and years ago, neither did I. I use to fear that there wouldn’t be enough. I use to be afraid that God wouldn’t provide. It was – let’s be honest about it – a lack of trust; a lack of *faith*. I was the pastor of a wonderful church; and yet I was demonstrating – on a very practical level – a lack of faith. It was really kind of ridiculous. In my first marriage, my wife would come home with a car full of groceries. And I’d be putting the groceries away, and I’d be worried. Did we spend too much? Are we going to have enough money to get through the week? Should we have maybe skimped a little bit on this or that? I mean, it was crazy! We had all the food we needed for the week. We had all this abundance. Just like we’d had the week before; and the week before that. I should’ve been *rejoicing* in this very tangible manifestation of God’s goodness. Instead, I was afraid that there wouldn’t be enough.

That’s not all. I got depressed at Christmastime because I was afraid that we were spending too much on presents. We stayed in really cheap motels on vacation, even though we could afford something a little better. It was so bad that one time the clerk at the desk of one of those cheap motels said, “Are you sure you want to stay here?” I’d have lunch with a colleague, and I’d really, really hope that he’d pick-up the bill.

It got so bad that a friend of mine accused me of being cheap. Not in a teasing kind of way but in an angry, confrontational kind of way.

The truth is I wasn’t cheap; not at my core, anyway. No, I wasn’t cheap, I was afraid. Being cheap was the symptom, fear was the problem. I was afraid of scarcity. God invites us into joy and abundance, but I was choosing fear and scarcity.

When we expect scarcity, we get scarcity. But when we expect abundance, we get abundance.

You know what turned it around for me? Creating a routine of generosity. I grew my faith through generosity. Well, to be clear, I didn’t grow my faith; God did. Faith is a gift from God. All I did was to accept God’s invitation to be generous.

It started with my decision to tithe. First 5%, then 10%. It could’ve been first 1%, then 2%. The percentage doesn’t really matter. The point is, I started the practice of percentage giving. First fruits giving. That’s where you give God a percentage of your weekly income, the first and the best, right off the top. Because God deserves our first and our best. You give away that first 1% or 2% or 10% each week or each month – you give it away for God’s work in the world – trusting that there will be enough left over for your family’s needs.

It started with my decision to tithe. And I discovered that there *was* enough left for my family’s needs. God, in God’s generosity – God, in God’s abundance – had provided enough. I acted *as if* it was so and I discovered that it really *is* so. I grew my faith through generosity.

It started with tithing, but it still wasn’t a routine. My pledge card said that I’d give a certain percentage right off the top, throughout the year; but most years I was scrambling in November and December to make good on that promise.

So I started giving each week. No matter what, I wrote a check each Sunday and put it in the offering plate. Weekly giving became a spiritual discipline no less important than daily prayer. And like daily prayer, I discovered that the discipline of generosity – the routine of generosity – was beginning to shape my heart. The fear of scarcity was beginning to slip away. In its place was the joy of abundance. And *trusting* in abundance. A generous heart is a trusting heart is a faithful heart. I grew my faith through generosity.

As I said, it works. There’s always enough left over for life’s necessities. It works partly because we always somehow find enough for what we deem to be life’s most important things: enough time, enough energy, enough money. Perhaps that money appears through our income, or a gift, or a random act of kindness. When we donate our time, talent and/or treasure as a weekly discipline, we are more open to receiving those resources when they appear. It’s kind of like a positive feedback loop. And it’s fun to both practice that generosity and to watch it happen!

This is how the universe works. Clinging to what we have creates a downward spiral of fear and scarcity. Giving it away lifts us toward joy and abundance. As Jesus said, “Give, and it will be given to you; a good measure, pressed down, shaken together, running over, will be put into your lap” (Luke 6:38). Routine giving nurtures trust and joy and abundance. We can grow our faith through generosity.

And when we do, we realize that God really does provide. Just like God did in the wilderness. We can dare to launch new ministries, trusting that God will provide. Even if we don’t have the cash in hand, we can trust that God will provide what we need when we need it, so long as what we’re doing and where we’re going is a faithful response to God’s call. If God has called us to a new ministry, then God will provide the resources for that ministry.

Generosity is one of life’s necessities: we have to eat each day and we have to offer something to God each week. We can choose between fear of scarcity or joy and abundance. Our faith can grow through generosity. Amen.