

The Abundance We've Been Missing

Luke 5: 1-11

I want to begin this by asking you a provocative question. If you were not already Christian, and that's assuming you are, would you want to be? Would you choose to be a Christian if you could choose right now (which, of course, you can)? What would be appealing about following Jesus? What would compel you to follow? That is not only the fundamental question of our lives, it is the question we will explore today.

This is the third in a three-part series of teachings on the subject of spiritual gifts. Last week, we talked about love as the most important spiritual gift. Two weeks ago, as we explored how each of us has particular spiritual gifts, it was suggested that one of the real spiritual gifts of Crossroads Church is evangelism. We are very good at telling the story, our story of following Jesus as a Christian community.

If that suggestion is true, and I think it is, our question today becomes supremely important. What story do we have to share? What purpose do we serve? What compels us to follow Jesus today? What is the source of our vitality, our health, and our passion as a Christian community, a people of faith at this time and place? This question is vital to us as individuals as well. What compels your journey as a Christian, a follower of Jesus, a seeker for truth?

Let's start with the ones who followed Jesus first. In Luke's gospel, three men who would become the core group of disciples, experienced a great time with Jesus catching fish. They caught lots of fish and that experience convinced them to follow him. Why?

Gospel accounts tend to be less about what happened and more about what is meant and how people respond. This story about Jesus, these three men, and their great day is filled with symbolism. Peter saw the superabundance of fish, really a huge amount, and recognized he was in the presence of holiness. He responded by confessing his unworthiness. It impresses me that

the focus of these men was not so much on the great wonder they had experienced. They were not so much filled with awe at Jesus' power, but immediately were filled with awareness of the Holy.

There is other symbolism in the story. The sea often represents primordial Chaos – evil. Jesus demonstrates power like God's creative power to bring life, in the form of fish, from the Chaos. Later Christians, around the time of Luke's writing, used the fish as the primary Christian symbol. They might well have read in this story the promise of growth and expansion of the young Christian Church – welcome news in times of repression.

Peter, James, and John experienced the Holy right in front of them, in Jesus. It transformed their vision of what their lives could be. So, they followed because of the promise that was implicit in Jesus' invitation – to find abundance in life. The promise was not to find an abundance of fish by staying where they were. The invitation was to leave that life. They followed on the basis of what they experienced in Jesus. They followed in hopes of discovering abundance in their living and learning what abundant life really meant according to Jesus.

You and I have a lot in common with those disciples, whether or not we realize it. I think we tend to follow the path of Jesus on the basis of what we've experienced. We do so hoping to discover a life of abundance and what abundant life really means according to Jesus.

What is the source of abundance in life? What is it that gives life the quality of being abundant? What may be standing in the way of the abundance we want?

There is no shortage of people and organizations offering to tell us, or sell us, on the way to find abundance. I'm doing that today, in a sense. Let's go ahead and start with a familiar voice offering abundant life – the church.

Some representatives of church believe that the path to abundant life is straight forward, following a prescribed list of beliefs and accepting the correct interpretation of those beliefs. If you vote correctly, use the right language, give money to church, and attend worship, then you will know abundant life. In my experience, however, I have not found this approach life-giving at all – certainly not abundant life!

Other voices of the church, and church-like groups, put forth a gospel of *feel good* theology. God wants you to feel good, be happy, rich, and successful. God wants your church to have a huge sanctuary and to have it full several times a Sunday. Such *gospels* claim the name of Jesus as the secret of abundance, but many of the trappings of success live in real tension with the Gospel's focus on the poor. It is a sly and slippery invitation to borrow our very identity from our stuff. We can become what we possess and that is really false abundance.

Plenty of voices other than churches offer the lure of abundant life. It's pretty obvious that commercials play that game. They promise a degree of fulfillment in life that will come by buying the right product – their product. Their promise is misleading.

Many people in this congregation have participated in the Landmark forum. This educational product promises abundance to those who take the course. Having taken at least the basic course, Landmark does provide some valuable tools for finding meaning and direction in life, and for developing more honesty and intimacy in relationships. They are steps toward finding abundance in our living.

There are many other approaches as well, and they hold out possibilities for finding a measure of abundant life. Ironically, my experience of these approaches leads me to conclude that they don't really trust the truth of the abundance they promise. Scattered among the

promises always seems to be claims of health, wealth, and gratification through possessions and titillating experiences to convince people to follow.

I'm a fan of health, wealth, and gratifications of all sorts. Jesus, however, did not offer tangible benefits such as the first century equivalent of BMW's. He seemed to offer just the opposite: persecution, hardship, poverty, and defeat as the way abundant life.

Sister Ita Clarke was one of four women who were brutally raped and murdered in El Salvador in 1980, while serving there in ministry to the poor. Shortly before her death, she wrote her niece in Brooklyn:

This is a terrible time in El Salvador for youth. A lot of idealism and commitment are getting snuffed out here and now. The reasons why so many people are being killed are quite complicated, yet there are some clear, simple strands. One is that people have found a meaning to life, to sacrifice, struggle, and even to die. And whether their life spans sixteen years, sixty, or ninety, for them their life has had a purpose. In many ways, these are fortunate people.

(The Challenge & Spirituality of Catholic Social Teaching by Marvin L. Krier Mich)

Have you experienced a sense of that kind of abundance – deep meaning and freedom from the strong grip of fear? What is the source of the abundance you've experienced in your life? What about the abundance you seek?

From where is abundance calling us? Certainly it calls us down the path of love. A large part of meaning in life involves loving and being loved. The spiritual gift of love is key to making the quality of life we call abundant.

Who do we need to love to find abundant life? Specifically, abundance comes as a result of loving your significant other, your family, friends, extended family, neighbors, and your enemies. In short, we are to love all those with whom we share this world.

How do we relate to all these different kinds of people in love in such a way that leads to abundant life? There are probably no experts when it comes to love, but there are some practical ideas to remember and practice.

First is the importance of *one to one* in relationships. When a parent relates to his or her children through the other parent, or couples relate to each other through a child, the capacity of that relationship to be loving is diminished.

Second, strive for a balance in the together and distance factors in your relationships. There needs to be enough closeness and also enough space. The appropriate balance tends to happen naturally when anxiety is low and a sense of playfulness is present.

Third, respect each other. Respect personal boundaries of the other person and monitor your own personal boundaries.

Fourth, be faithful in moving toward the other person with loving honesty. This is true in loving friends and enemies alike. The best way to love and respect an enemy or a rival is by standing in his or her space, in their skin – by seeing the world through their eyes.

More than anything else, the way to abundance is to know yourself and love yourself – to find the Holy within yourself and learn to recognize that same spirit in others. On that pathway, true abundance comes by finding passion worthy of yourself and by living that passion.

My son Jonathan has been conscious of a hunger to find the blend of his passions: music and social justice. To this end, he wrote the following:

The next Sunday afternoon, instead of serving dinner [to the homeless at a local church], I went upstairs to [the church's] sanctuary. Evidently, those who haven't yet been served wait up in the sanctuary until there is room. People there are hungry, tired, and short of temper. This became the context for the blend I had been searching for. I sat down at the upright piano in the front of the room, and began to play. Once I had a chord progression that

felt right, I started to sing. Immediately, like a sudden change in weather pattern, the mood of that room shifted. It was as if the presence of music gave everyone the permission to let go of some of the anxiety they had been carrying.

Every week, I would go over at 4:00 in the afternoon, and play. After a few weeks, the crowd began to grow. More people started coming, and others started to come back upstairs after they finished eating. Almost without fail, a homeless man or woman would speak to me between songs, and tell me that they felt better equipped to face their week for having been there. Sunday nights, I would describe some of these experiences to the brothers gathered. Soon, some of them began coming with me, bringing their voices, their instruments, and the closeness of a loving and supportive community that, for so many homeless people, is not present in their lives. In this way, we, as poor college students, are able to give out of our abundance, the same way a rich philanthropist gives out of his/her abundance.

Jesus, through the New Testament Church, calls people to find their blend of passions, to give feet to their prayers, and thus to follow the path to abundant life. Will you respond to that invitation? Every spring, we invite all who are members of the congregation to renew their membership as a sign of commitment to Crossroads. Will the invitation to abundant life compel you to make or renew a decision to follow Jesus this coming year?

Mother Teresa taught that abundance lies in doing what lies in front of you and loving the one who stands before you. She saw Jesus in the poor and dying. If our passion lies right in front of us, will we embrace it. If so, let us follow day by day, step by step.