

The Secret of Abundance

Amos 8:4-7, Jeremiah 8:20-9:1

Series: "Why Should I Follow Jesus?"

This is the second sermon in the series titled "Why Should I Follow Jesus?" Through this series, I am sharing at some of the reasons for my faith and why I choose, on my life journey, to follow Jesus. The first reason was "joy." The second reason is the "promise of abundance." This is abundance for our own lives, for our families, for this congregation, our communities, and for the whole world.

The Kingdom of God was sometimes described in the Bible as a spring in the desert or a fountain of abundance. There are deserts all around us: food deserts, educational deserts, security and safety deserts, and spiritual deserts. There are deserts within us where there is almost no moisture and very little growth—dry and desolate places where fertile soil seems to be blowing away.

There are deserts between us--relationships without passion or joy. Bitterness festers and saps energy. Sadness eats up any sense of hope. The ancient prophet Jeremiah painted a powerful word picture:

²⁰"The harvest is past, the summer is ended, and we are not saved."

²¹For the hurt of my poor people I am hurt, I mourn, and dismay has taken hold of me.

²²Is there no balm in Gilead? Is there no physician there? Why then has the health of my poor people not been restored?

90 that my head were a spring of water, and my eyes a fountain of tears, so that I might weep day and night for the slain of my poor people!

There are deserts everywhere—but why? Why are they here? More important—what will we do about them? We come to church perhaps seeking answers. We come perhaps looking to find a spring – an oasis. We come maybe hoping against hope to find fountain of abundance and in our hearts, we cry, "God, what are you going to do about these deserts in our lives?" And in a response that is either deafening in its silence or, behind that silence, a quiet word, "You are not alone. We're in this together." It is not just the "we" who occupy this room of worship this morning, but also the Spirit of Life who indwells us and our relationships. The God we seek in worship is already here in us and between us and asking, "What will you and I do together to make that spring flow in those deserts?" That is the question. And we turn to our faith tradition, our community relationship, and the depth of our own souls to find answers that satisfy.

In Charles Dickens' memorable play *A Christmas Carol*, the principal character Ebenezer Scrooge was a walking and talking desert. He was bitterly unhappy. He was lonely and desperately clinging for a sense of abundance to his money—hoarding it, taking constant inventory, and begrudging any request for him to share—to give it away. Most of us are familiar with Scrooge's journey, accompanied by 3 spirits, on an intense journey to a life of abundance, joy, and generosity. The pre-spirit Scrooge once famously said, "Christmas is "'a poor excuse to pick a man's pocket every 25th of December.'

Scrooge clearly learned his attitude from some of the characters the prophet Amos was talking about. Those ancient *Scrooges* were people whose whole lives revolved around money: getting more money, making more money, having more money. They even resented the Sabbath restrictions on business that did not allow them to be making money on that holy day once a week. They would ask, "When will the new moon be over so that we may sell grain; and the Sabbath, so that we may offer wheat for sale?" You get the feeling they spent entire Sabbath

(Friday sundown to Saturday sundown) thinking up new ways to grow their businesses, to make them more profitable, and to optimize their investments.

But what's so bad about that? Actually, they were losing three very valuable possessions in their pursuit of success—three things. They were losing integrity by being willing to exploit, and even cheat, to increase their profit margin. Amos told us they would “make the ephah small and the shekel great,...practice deceit with false balances.” In other words, they would buy low sell high by manipulating the low & high. They were losing their integrity.

They were also losing their humanity by valuing efficiency about relationships. They were treating people as commodities, turning them into numbers, and dropping them when the numbers don't add up--⁶buying the poor for silver and the needy for a pair of sandals.”

Finally, they were losing a sense of priority, of what's most important. Jesus famously said “Sabbath was made for man, not man for the Sabbath,” but rigid religious rules were not the only way to mistreat value of Sabbath. Shabbat was commanded and observed to remind Israel where she came from – slaves in Egypt. It was set aside as a time to remember that all humanity are equality loved and values by God and called to value all others same way. The value of setting aside a day as holy is to remember that other people are part of us. They are not commodities to be bought or sold, not customers to be exploited, and not bases for our own power to be manipulated. At least for a 24-hour period, we are reminded how God views humanity. In the Israel of Amos' time, those values had largely been forgotten--much as in our own time, place, and culture.

We have arrived at a cultural crossroads – a fork in the road. Today is a time of choice and decision and the clarity of this moment is provided by several factors, including: political polarization, economic struggle, social stratification, religious rift, and the pervading question, “In what will we place our trust?”

I have a question for you. When in your life have you felt rich? Maybe you've played the game that you have \$1 million. How would you spent it? My experience playing that game is that, before long, the \$1 million just doesn't feel like enough! You are probably familiar with the many stories about lottery winners who end up having lost everything—destitute. So, I'll repeat the question– when in your life have you felt rich?

Today we face very much the same choice as people did in Jesus' day. Individually, we have a choice about how we'll seek to be rich: how we'll seek security, safety, and happiness. It is a choice about what we'll will look for from the money we make. As a nation, we face a choice as to how we'll seek prosperity and security: the Kingdom of Caesar vs. the Kingdom of God. Caesar's kingdom is one of top-down power of the “haves” over the “have-nots.” Its trust is in military force to coerce. There is a desire for a peace that involves no conflicts and business-as-usual.

We can choose the Kingdom of Caesar or the Kingdom of God. God' Kingdom represents communal power with nor over, trust in shared power and access. Everyone has a voice. The desire for peace is for shalom (justice, compassion, love). The choice for this kingdom is not made with words or intentions, but with actions. Currently we are choosing the Kingdom of Caesar. Its power is very difficult to resist. It is very seductive and pervasive as compared to the Kingdom of God that Jesus taught and in which he believed. The issues behind this choice are rather counter-intuitive. The more we strive to get more, sell more, and make more, the greater our sense of deficit.

It is also odd that the less we strive for more—the more we let that go—the greater a sense of abundance we experience. Many voices tell us that this sounds kind of un-American, anti-capitalist, and even un-Christian. That may be part of the problem. How will we measure success and abundance as a congregation? The most common way is through budgets (dollars), through numbers of people attending, and through the number of baptisms performed.. The assumption is that these gauges track how many are choosing faithful discipleship.

I've been thinking this week about how we experience abundance at Crossroads Church. Now, I don't always have an abundance of new ideas, so when I get one I like to use it as many times as possible. The idea to follow was used in my "E-notes from Jack" this past week. Let me begin with the disclaimer that it's dangerous to view religious faith as commodity, something to be bought and sold. Such an approach can be problematic, but there is some benefit, in being clear about what people are actually looking for in a church and also what our church actually provides.

People looking for three things at church, though I imagine many people are seeking these consciously. The first thing they are looking for is to be *outfitted* for life's journey. You may have gone to a sporting goods store to be outfitted for your favorite sport or to an outdoor store to be outfitted for camping or hiking. In a similar way, people come to church to be outfitted for life—to be equipped with the skills, knowledge, and wisdom to walk that path well. And church does that—helps equip us for that journey with certain skills such as how to think theologically, how to listen in depth, how to share our lives cooperatively, and how to offer and receive forgiveness. Church also offers opportunities to learn skills in doing hands-on ministry with the poor, the very young, and the very old; and with those who are sick, dying, and grieving.

The second thing people are looking for at church is to be part of a community. Community can be like the family we choose rather than the family into which we're born or adopted. Sometimes people are looking for a community of like-minded friends. And congregations offer community that can feel like a family or like friendships. It is always a group of people with whom to practice loving and forgiving. And this community will always be available to us—at least in some form—if we want it and if we seek it.

The third thing people are seeking is to experience God, the holy, the numinous—the mysterious and mystical reality of life beyond explanation and understanding. Churches offer experiences of the holy. Sometimes these happen in the process of being equipped—of the learning, growing, and doing. Almost always, we experience the holy through deep and intimate human relationships. And sometimes, through the maze of our relationships and experiences, we glimpse the holy itself. And we come to a crucial discovery, that the holy we're seeking out there is really living in here.

Author Thomas Friedman (*The World is Flat*, 367) wrote that employers today cannot offer a lifetime of employment. They can offer, however, a lifetime of employability. They can offer knowledge, skills, and support for workers to grow and stay up to date. In some ways, church does the same thing. No congregation can guarantee that it will always exist, that it will always be able to afford its building or always be able to provide its ministries as an institutional entity. But we can always offer what people need to live well: equipping us to be faithful on the journey, offering community to share the love of God, and means to experience the presence of God. These are skills, experiences, and attitudes that we can keep forever.

Growing up in modern western society, we tend to assume some things. These include the unquestioned value of efficiency and optimization, the moral goodness of free-enterprise, and

the value of pursuing wealth. But there are times when efficiency gobbles up all the leftovers where the poor used to glean. Many times, optimization feeds a sense of scarcity and we lose the abundance that is pressed down and overflowing. There are times when a single-minded pursuit of success and wealth just leaves us empty. At the same time, money we gain can lead to opportunities for sharing and wealth can become a powerful means of making a difference in world.

What is the secret of abundance? It is not found in having money – or in not having money. It is found in letting go the belief that money or success or status will in themselves bring abundance. Before European settlers came to North America, a series of Indian tribes sharing the common language Iroquois, lived with no private property. All was shared in common. They had no poverty because they lived in community. A 17th-century French Jesuit priest wrote: “Their kindness and courtesy not only makes them liberal with what they have, but causes them to possess hardly anything except in common.” (Howard Zinn, *A People’s History of the United States: 1492-present*, 20)

A 20th-century American scholar wrote of their spirit, “Could we (meaning western societies) make [that spirit] our own, there would be an eternally inexhaustible earth and a forever lasting peace.” (Howard Zinn, 22)

This, then, is the secret of abundance:

- Only now -- only here
- Only what you already possess
- Only what you share with others
- Only now -- only here
- Only what you already possess
- Only what you share with others
- Do this and you will live abundantly