

“Believe in the Plenty”

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¹After this the Lord appointed seventy others and sent them on ahead of him in pairs to every town and place where he himself intended to go. ²He said to them, "The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few; therefore, ask the Lord of the harvest to send out laborers into his harvest. ³Go on your way. See, I am sending you out like lambs into the midst of wolves. ⁴Carry no purse, no bag, no sandals; and greet no one on the road. ⁵Whatever house you enter, first say, 'Peace to this house!' ⁶And if anyone is there who shares in peace, your peace will rest on that person; but if not, it will return to you. ⁷Remain in the same house, eating and drinking whatever they provide, for the laborer deserves to be paid. Do not move about from house to house. ⁸Whenever you enter a town and its people welcome you, eat what is set before you; ⁹cure the sick who are there, and say to them, 'The kingdom of God has come near to you.' ¹⁰But whenever you enter a town and they do not welcome you, go out into its streets and say, ¹¹'Even the dust of your town that clings to our feet, we wipe off in protest against you. Yet know this: the kingdom of God has come near.' ... ¹⁶"Whoever listens to you listens to me, and whoever rejects you rejects me, and whoever rejects me rejects the one who sent me."

¹⁷The seventy returned with joy, saying, "Lord, in your name even the demons submit to us!" ¹⁸He said to them, "I watched Satan fall from heaven like a flash of lightning. ¹⁹See, I have given you authority to tread on snakes and scorpions, and over all the power of the enemy; and nothing will hurt you. ²⁰Nevertheless, do not rejoice at this, that the spirits submit to you, but rejoice that your names are written in heaven."
(Luke 10:1-11, 16-20)

Last fall, I shared with you an insight from a sermon that the great Presbyterian preacher Peter Marshall preached in Georgia during the Great Depression. "Of all the promises in the Bible," Marshall said, "I think this is the least believed: seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness; and all these things will be added unto you." In other words, if you seek God above all else, then you do not need to worry, because the things that you need will come – food, clothing, shelter, security, all will be provided for you. Marshall was old school, so he internalized this promise from the Sermon on the Mount in the language and cadence of the King James Version: "*Seek ye first the kingdom of God and his righteousness; and all these things will be added unto you.*"

"We hear it," Marshall said, "but we just don't believe it."

In this passage from Luke, it is clear that Jesus wanted his disciples not only to believe this promise, but to go out into the world relying upon it. He chose seventy of them and sent them out, two by two, "*like lambs into the midst of wolves.*" They carried no wallet or purse, no bag, not even an extra pair of shoes. They trusted that when they were tired, a door would be opened... that when they were hungry, a seat at some table would be offered... that when a threat presented itself, aid would appear. It was faith not in self-sufficiency, but in God's provision and care.

Maybe that's why Jesus said that the laborers were hard to find. Maybe there just weren't that many people who were willing to take the risks inherent in that kind of faith. Maybe there still aren't. We could easily focus on this one clause – "*the laborers are few*" -- for a whole sermon. After all, if we want to be the church the way God wants us to be the



church, it would be great to have some more laborers – more adults who raise their hands to teach Sunday School or help lead the youth group... more people to commit to regular Bible study... more disciples willing to give time, talent, and treasure in service to God and neighbor. Jesus said very specifically that, if we need more laborers, we should ask the Lord of the harvest to send some more. OK, I'm asking. Lord! Send us some volunteers who have time and energy and willingness to serve!

But that's not today's sermon. Today's sermon is what Jesus said first. Jesus said to them, "*The harvest is plentiful, but the laborers are few.*" Jesus did not lead with scarcity. He led with abundance – the rich, plentiful, abundant harvest he saw right around them, just waiting to be picked.

Unfortunately, we usually start with the scarcity. We know we have work to do, but we look at the clock and remind ourselves that there are only so many hours in the day. We have bills to pay, but only so much money available to pay them. The language of politics, the language of economics, the language of ethics and morality, they all speak of limits: limits on our bank accounts, limits on our energy, limits on what we think we can take on and accomplish. Stephen Covey, author of the bestseller *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*, says that these conversations start with what he calls the "Scarcity Mentality." That mentality, Covey says, causes us to view life as if there is only one big pie out there, that there is only a limited amount of joy, love, support, and satisfaction, and that means that we better hustle up and grab as much as we can and hold onto it, because if someone else beats us to it, then we lose.¹

However, if we pay attention to the lessons and actions of Jesus, we see a recurring pattern that rejects the Scarcity Mentality. That pattern is, in fact, the very opposite of the Scarcity Mentality. "The harvest is *plentiful*," Jesus says. There is so much good stuff right around us, right in front of us, if we just look for it. God also wants us to believe in that plenty, even when we cannot see it. God's net of care is always under us, and if we are willing to swing out on the trapeze of faith... if we are willing to seek God first and we are willing to act on that faith... then, even if we fall, that net will catch us every time.

The Quaker theologian and author Parker Palmer used to tell a story about a flight he once took from Chicago to Denver. Just as the plane moved out onto the runway at O'Hare and powered up for take-off, the pilot suddenly throttled back and brought the plane to a stop. Everyone's heart sank, because they knew this could not be good. The pilot came on the intercom. "I've got some bad news, and some really bad news," he said.

The bad news was that there were storms all over the Midwest and hundreds of flights were being grounded, so this delay would take a while. "But the really bad news," he continued, "is that, because this was supposed to be a quick flight, we have very little food on board."

Audible groans filled the cabin. The mood turned pretty sour almost instantly. One of the flight attendants felt like she needed to at least say something. But better yet, she thought she could do something. So, she picked up the cabin microphone. "We are really sorry folks," she said. "We didn't plan on this and we can't do anything about it. But we know that, for some of you, this is a big deal. You were looking forward to a good lunch in Denver and now we are stuck on the tarmac in Chicago. Some of you may have a medical condition and might be worried about your blood sugar level. Others of you may not care

¹ Stephen R. Covey. *The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. New York: Fireside (1989), p. 219.

all that much and are feeling content just to read your book and grab some snacks out of your bag. But I have an idea. I'm going to pass around some bread baskets. If everyone will just put something in the basket – a snack you've brought along – maybe some peanut butter crackers, or a Snickers bar, some Lifesavers, chewing gum or even some Tums. If you don't have anything to eat, maybe you'd like to share a pen or a business card or a bookmark. When the basket has gone around, then we'll send it back out again, and everyone take what you need. I'll start the basket up here, and in the meantime, I'll make some coffee."

The feeling in the cabin changed almost immediately. The complaining stopped. People started looking for things to contribute. They rummaged through carry-ons to find all kinds of things. One person from Wisconsin had some salami and cheese. Somehow a few bottles of wine made their way into the basket, which in itself seems like a miracle. Around the plane, people started talking with each other and laughing together, as they miraculously moved from mentality of scarcity to an appreciation of plenty and abundance.

When the flight finally got to Denver, Palmer stayed in his seat as everyone got off the plane. He wanted to speak to that flight attendant. The last one off the plane, he found her in the forward galley next to the exit door. He said, "You know, what you did with that basket reminded me of a story about Jesus. He was out on a hillside with a bunch of hungry people, but five of them had some bread, someone else had two fish, and somehow Jesus fed the entire multitude with those simple gifts. Have you ever heard that story?"

She just looked at him and smiled, and said, "Of course I know that story. That's why I did it."²

As Peter Marshall said, we hear the promise of God that, if we put our trust in God first, if we seek God first, if we serve God first, then everything else has a way of working itself out. We hear that promise, he said, but we just don't believe it. I think he is absolutely right. We don't live like we believe it. We tell ourselves that there is no net... that it's up to me to take care of everything and everyone.

But that flight attendant – she did believe it. She looked out into the cabin of that plane, and she knew the harvest was plentiful. So, she picked up a basket and started passing it around. And what prompted her to do that? A story about Jesus. But more than just a story: faith in the story... faith in the One who told the story... confidence in God, and confidence in God's people. She believed in the plenty and she was willing to act in faith upon it. And sure enough, the net was there to catch them, even though most of the people on that plane could not see it.

I look out here today, and what I see is abundance. We all talk a lot about the way things used to be... that more people used to fill these pews... that money seems to be tighter today than it used to be... that the laborers are few, especially compared to the teams of people that used to handle the ministries of this church. But I am here to tell you that this harvest is plentiful. There is so much good in this congregation, so much potential in this congregation and this community. There is generosity and commitment and faith in this congregation. This congregation also has an endowment that is twice as large as the ones of the other churches I have served. And everyone here has something they can put in the

² Story shared by Dean Lloyd, "From Scarcity to Abundance," <https://cathedral.org/sermons/from-scarcity-to-abundance-2/>, and by Patricia de Jong, "There Will be Enough," <http://firstchurchberkeley.org/written-sermon/there-will-be-enough>.

basket – a talent or ability... time to invest in the ministries of the church... money that could easily be diverted from other things we spend our money on.

And there is only one thing we need to do to unleash the full power of that plenty. There is one simple step that we can take to trigger a chain reaction of blessings for us as a congregation and as children of God. Like that flight attendant, we have to believe in the plenty. We have to believe the promise that, if we put God first, if we seek God first, then a lot of good things will start happening.

Ninety years ago, in the depths of the Great Depression, Peter Marshall said that Christians knew about that promise, but they simply did not believe it. Are you ready to believe it? Are you willing to believe it? Will you dare to believe the promise that, if we put our minds to seeking God first and above all, then God will find a way to not just take care of us, but to do great things through us?

If we can believe and live that promise, people will see it. People will notice the plentiful harvest. They may even say to us, "Hey, what you did reminds me of a story about Jesus."

And we can then say with a smile, "Yeah, I know. That's why I did it!"

In the name of the Father, the Son, and the Holy Spirit. **Amen.**