



FIRST (SCOTS) SERMONS

“THE REALITY OF ABUNDANCE”

Scripture Lessons: Nehemiah 9:9-15; Matthew 14:13-21

This sermon was preached by Dr. L. Holton Siegling, Jr. on Sunday, August 6, 2017 at First (Scots) Presbyterian Church in Charleston, South Carolina.

Nehemiah 9:9-15(NRSV)

⁹ “And you saw the distress of our ancestors in Egypt and heard their cry at the Red Sea.^[a] ¹⁰ You performed signs and wonders against Pharaoh and all his servants and all the people of his land, for you knew that they acted insolently against our ancestors. You made a name for yourself, which remains to this day. ¹¹ And you divided the sea before them, so that they passed through the sea on dry land, but you threw their pursuers into the depths, like a stone into mighty waters. ¹² Moreover, you led them by day with a pillar of cloud, and by night with a pillar of fire, to give them light on the way in which they should go. ¹³ You came down also upon Mount Sinai, and spoke with them from heaven, and gave them right ordinances and true laws, good statutes and commandments, ¹⁴ and you made known your holy sabbath to them and gave them commandments and statutes and a law through your servant Moses. ¹⁵ For their hunger you gave them bread from heaven, and for their thirst you brought water for them out of the rock, and you told them to go in to possess the land that you swore to give them.”

The grass withers and the flower fades, but the Word of the Lord endures forever. Amen.

As we turn our attention to the morning’s New Testament Lesson, allow me to say how thankful I am for the wonderful blessing and responsibility you have shared with me not only as one of your pastors, but also to read and proclaim God’s Word from this pulpit. I’m so excited about what God has in store for us as a church family, and I’m excited how the Holy Spirit will reveal new things to us even this day.

Matthew 14:13-21(NRSV)

¹³ Now when Jesus heard this, he withdrew from there in a boat to a deserted place by himself. But when the crowds heard it, they followed him on foot from the towns. ¹⁴ When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had compassion for them and cured their sick. ¹⁵ When it was evening, the disciples came to him and said, “This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves.” ¹⁶ Jesus said to them, “They need not go away; you give them something to eat.” ¹⁷ They replied, “We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish.” ¹⁸ And he said, “Bring them here to me.” ¹⁹ Then he ordered the crowds to sit down on the grass. Taking the five loaves and the two fish, he looked up to heaven, and blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds. ²⁰ And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full. ²¹ And those who ate were about five thousand men, besides women and children.

Leader: This is the Word of the Lord.

People: Thanks be to God.

Let us pray...

Almighty and Everlasting God, may the words of my mouth and the meditations of each of our hearts be pleasing, acceptable, and even joyful in your sight, for you are our Rock, and our Redeemer. Amen.

After the movers had loaded the contents of our home on a truck, and as we ourselves were about ready to leave our house, I tried to distract Martha Ann so as to keep her from turning around and looking upon our now empty home. I knew that if she looked back she would get all nostalgic on me and that our departure would be postponed by at least 15 minutes. It ended up being more like 20 minutes...and there were some tears.

But, as cries go, hers was a thankful cry in that it resonated with a deep awareness of just how blessed we were to have lived there, to have had friends like Catherine come over and visit with us from time to time, to have watched 1001 family movies on that lime green couch of ours. Clearly the couch wasn't there anymore, but the memories remained! Indeed, Martha Ann's cry flowed from a thankful heart, but it was still a cry!

That can happen you know. When people move from one place to another it can be accompanied by a sense of anxiety over the unexpected - a new home, a new school, a new church family.

Now, in our case, we are by no means unfamiliar with Charleston. In fact, it was that familiarity with Charleston and her people that gave us a measure of peace about leaving such a special place and to begin this wonderful and new spiritual journey with you!

In many ways, Charleston is home for me and my family. I suppose it has been that way ever since Johannes Zacharias Siegling arrived in Charleston from Germany in November of 1819. With that said, I'd be remiss if I didn't express how wonderful it is to see several members of our family here this morning! Some friends from High School as well as friends from Knoxville!

As you can imagine, our familiarity with Charleston, it runs much deeper than genealogy or even geography, though I must admit that knowing how to pronounce Hassel Street probably didn't hurt my chances in the search process at all. No! Our familiarity, it encompasses a variety of relationships and shared experiences.

I have some wonderful memories of eating ice cream at my grandparent's home over on King Street following German Friendly meetings. I can still see Hazel Parker sitting there behind her desk at the East Bay Playground - always looking so distinguished and matronly...I remember running for her for one of our city track meets many years ago.

As you have probably surmised, throughout our recent pastoral search process, our familiarity with the people of Charleston, with the ecclesiology of the Lowcountry, not to mention knowing at least something of the amazing spiritual footprint that our church family, by God's grace, has imprinted upon the Holy City for the last 286 years -- all of this and so much more functioned for me as a kind of familiarity that breeds trust.

But more than that, it served to remind me that when we looked upon our empty home in Knoxville or when we miss our friends even now - oh, that our home is where we are, and our friends, they will always be in our hearts.

To put it another way, it served to remind me of one the most important lessons that God would have us to learn. You see, that attitude of scarcity which can creep into our hearts and minds from time to time...the one that tells us that we don't have enough or that we are somehow alone...it is only an illusion, dear friends!

Now, I understand that there are situations in life and in the life of a great many people the world over wherein not even meager portions are present and I certainly don't want to dismiss that...for that is very real crisis. But what I'm talking about here is the appetite of our souls and the posture of our spirits. I'm talking about the sustenance that the Lord provides, and how it is that every child of God is rich beyond measure.

But try telling that to the Israelites! It seems that from the very outset of their flight from Egypt they began to question Moses - they began to question God. There they were with calloused hands and scarred backs...physical and emotional wounds that ran deep.

And then, as if to add insult to injury, their newfound freedom has apparently come without food. "Well, what kind of freedom is that?" we may ask. ...Freedom to die? It's no wonder a theology of scarcity began to set in.

Listen to them: "If only we had died by the hand of the Lord in the land of Egypt, when we sat by the fleshpots and ate our fill of bread; for you have brought us out into this wilderness to kill this whole assembly with hunger."

Our Old Testament Lesson this morning - it locates us within God's story of salvation at a point in time when God's faithfulness and graciousness, God' generosity...can finally be affirmed...for God demonstrates to His children that, even in the wilderness - even in the bareness of the desert - there is provision...there is manna...there is grace!

About God's riches that have come at Christ's expense, the Bible makes it abundantly clear, the Apostle Paul said to us that God's grace is sufficient...it is enough!

Friends, this is one of the great joys of the Gospel that we are blessed to be able to proclaim in the midst of a world that all-too-often faces the challenges of each new day from within a framework of scarcity. We hear it all the time. You can't do anything about it! There's not enough! It won't make a difference! Why even try!

If the truth be known, that kind of attitude, it can set quick like concrete, forming a premature epitaph even in the heart of a child of God, but also know this...it is one of the jobs of Christ's Church to come along side that which is nothing more than a temporal tombstone and smash it to smithereens.

To that person who is hurting or grieving and who can find no way out of their loneliness...to the person dealing with a dreadful diagnosis...to the one who must live with the consequences of their previous actions....oh, these are the ones who so desperately need to hear our story of faith, be it for the first time or the 100th time! And what is that story?

Well, I'll tell you what it is not! Ours is not the story of a person who was blind from birth and who meets Jesus, but who remains blind until their death - we will not find that story in the Bible. There is no story of a paraplegic who goes home on his mat after meeting our Savior!

We can search the breadth and scope of God's Word and we will not come across that story of Peter losing his focus, beginning to sink in the water and Jesus letting him drown. We will not find that story because God has made it abundantly clear that people do not leave the presence of our Savior worse off than when they came to him.

Allow me to be very clear about something...Jesus - the one who was, and is, and will forever be - he is not the architect of scarcity. Jesus is the bestower of grace! He is the very reality of abundance...the great benefactor of the blessed children of God.

And our inheritance -- what it means for us to live together as heirs of the grace of life -- it means that we have the awesome responsibility of sharing with our neighbors the good news that we are never defined by what we don't have, but by what we do have in Jesus Christ our Lord.

And what we have in Jesus is a Savior who, when we find ourselves running out of wine at the wedding, he doesn't leave us to our own devices. And when we find ourselves on a hillside with 5000 hungry people and just a few loaves and fish to our name, Jesus doesn't tell us: "Well, that's just too bad!"

No! What Jesus does, in the face of what we might label as small or insufficient -- we are talking about five loaves and two fish, after all -- in the face of that kind of scarcity, Jesus says this: "They need not go away; You give them something to eat."

Isn't that just like Jesus! Seeing not what is, but what will be...God's promised abundance that will eventually come!

Taken as a charge, "You give them something to eat," can that not serve to remind Christ's Church today, wherever she is found, of the need to continually look beyond what we can see...all the way to what God sees...that deeper, hidden, sometimes nearly imperceptible abundance?

And notice where it all starts for Jesus...it starts with giving thanks! Jesus knew what they had...he knows what we have...but he also knows about the abiding power and promises of God that we can scarcely imagine...and so Jesus begins with thanksgiving!

The Bible tells us that, taking the loaves and fish, and, in a way that sounds almost sacramental, "[Jesus] looked up to heaven, and [he] blessed and broke the loaves, and gave them to the disciples, and the disciples gave them to the crowds."

This is one of the few stories that is recounted in all four of the Gospels, and in Mark's account, we are told that, prior to the meal being distributed, the people are broken up into groups. Granted, they are groups of 50 or 100, but they are still smaller groups.

The reason I mention that at this juncture is because that aspect of the story reminds me that God desires for His church to exist in community...and one of ways that this happens is through authentic and life giving relationships...a shared history that comes from knowing one another (PAUSE).

Some people are curious about my personal goals for the coming year. As I was preparing this morning's sermon and reflecting upon Christ's feeding of the 5000, and the absolutely incredible abundance that we share as members of this church family...a few of those goals came into focus.

To begin, I/we can't wait to get to know you! Be it individually or in smaller groups -- maybe it comes in the form of play dates with Martha Ann and the kids...or small groups...the list goes on and on.

Suffice to say, we will cherish those opportunities to get to know you - especially those on a slightly smaller scale, and inasmuch as you can help us to do that, and make a large church feel slightly smaller - even doing something as simple as wearing your name tag...believe me, I'm grateful!

Secondly, and this stems from how Jesus shared what ended up being a veritable feast with all those who were present, I look forward to the ways that, together, we can maximize our ministry of hospitality, and continue to graciously and faithfully express the abundances of the promises of God with our neighbors here in Charleston and all over the world.

Thirdly, I anticipate learning about and celebrating and actually implementing the blueprint that our church family has identified as the Pillars of the First (Scots) Presbyterian Church, for in this way we will be giving thanks to God, and, in fact, we will be looking beyond ourselves...all the way to who God has called us to be!

A little over a week ago Martha Ann and I raced back to Charleston to be meet the moving truck. We arrived the day before the movers. We walked up the stairs, unlocked the front door and stood in the doorway. Of course, there was nothing yet in our home...not a picture on the wall...not a rug on the floor...nothing. Our house was completely empty.

But that didn't dampen Martha Ann's spirit. She took a deep breath and smiled a lovely smile. It was the kind of smile that meets at the intersection of hard work and potential. Hard work in the sense that establishing a home is not an easy task, and potential in that Martha Ann saw in that empty home a hidden abundance.

She saw the friends that would one day visit and perhaps gather around our dining room table and share a meal. I think she may have even seen glimpses of the next 1001 movies that we would watch as a family. At the end of the day, her smile was once again a smile of thanks,

because she knew -- as I know -- as we all know on our best days -- that our God is a God of abundance!

Let us pray...Lord, you have told us through your servants to rejoice in you always. Guide us by your words and your Spirit that we may be able to celebrate your abundance in all times and in all places. In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.