

Recognizing and Celebrating God's Abundance

Sermon for Sunday, May 3, 2020

Fourth Sunday of Easter, Year A

Sermon Text(s): John 10:1-10

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Jesus says that he came that we may have life, and may have it abundantly.

At the annual vestry retreat back in January, the vestry took time to consider how the various ministries of our church reflect our stated mission and values.

Let me share both of them with you, for those of you who may be unfamiliar with them:

(share screen and show document on Zoom)

We had just updated our mission statement through the parish-wide discernment process we went through in 2018-19. Our parish values statement, however, had not been updated since it was crafted during the rector search process in 2016.

As we reflected on our life as a congregation in light of these statements, we made some powerful connections about how our ministries embody the values of joy, compassion, reconciliation, and welcome. But there was one thing that seemed to be missing: abundance.

Jesus said that he came that we may have life, and may have it abundantly. He promised us that God's grace is sufficient for us and that God will provide for all our needs. At St. John's, we recognize this and have allowed it to guide some pretty major decisions throughout our history. Although we haven't drafted an official statement for it yet, the vestry felt it was important that we add "Recognize and Celebrate God's Abundance" to our list of values.

As we all know, it's pretty easy to agree with spiritual values like compassion and abundance in the abstract, but it's an entirely different thing to put them into practice in the midst of real life. In this imperfect world of ours, people often try the limits of our compassion and finite resources seem to call for a mindset of scarcity rather than abundance.

Sometimes it's hard to know how to live into these values that sound good on paper but can vanish too quickly when the rubber hits the road. We can talk a good game about "recognizing and celebrating God's abundance," but when resources seem to be getting scarce, do we revert to taking what we need for ourselves without any regard for others?

The widespread shortage of toilet paper in the first weeks of the shelter-in-place order was a perfect example of what happens when fear and a mindset of scarcity drive people's actions. I'll be the first to admit I almost got sucked into it myself. Even though we had plenty of toilet paper backstocked in the house (because we buy in bulk every few months), some part of me felt this urge to go out and buy toilet paper, just because everyone else was doing it, and if they all went and bought all of it, there might not be any for me later when I needed it!

I managed to control myself and not go out and buy any toilet paper when I knew I didn't need any, but oh, I wanted to! Part of the way I controlled myself and kept myself from giving in to those base, selfish urges, was reminding myself of the principle of abundance. I'm not joking, I actually had an internal dialogue with myself where I reminded myself that God invites us to live into a mindset of abundance, not scarcity, and it helped me stop myself from following the panicked herds to the store to buy toilet paper.

It's so easy to forget, to forget those values to which we have pledged our lives as Christians, the minute something starts to pull us in another direction. That's why I try to be intentional about keeping our mission and values statements in front of our vestry and the wider congregation, so they don't become just a page of our website that makes us look good to a few first-time visitors, but that none of us inside the congregation ever pay attention to or think about.

At the April Vestry meeting, the Vestry made some decisions that have drawn some criticism from members of the congregation. In that meeting they voted to give \$10,000 from our Community Project Fund to help individuals in need as a result of the economic impact of the shelter-in-place order AND they also voted to apply for a Payroll Protection Program Loan from the government.

These two actions seemed contradictory to some people. How could we say we were in need of a loan to make our payroll expenses when we were in a financial position to give away \$10,000? And if we had enough money in the bank to make payroll this month, how could we in good conscience apply for a loan if our doing

so might mean that some other organization who needed the money more might not get any?

I'd like to reflect on these actions in the light of our value of "Recognizing and Celebrating God's Abundance."

By choosing to give away the \$10,000, the Vestry was recognizing and celebrating the abundance we have been given as a parish. The theology of tithing is that you give to others first, out of your abundance, not out of what is left over after you've kept everything you need for yourself. Although taking this leap of faith and giving to others first may feel foolish, those who do so consistently report that their own needs are actually met more fully than when they insisted on caring for themselves before others. As Jesus said, "give, and it will be given to you... the measure you give will be the measure you get back." (Luke 6:38)

In making this decision, the Vestry and the Outreach Committee who suggested it were all very aware that doing this was a violation of the "letter of the law" that we had put in place with the original resolution we passed back in November, which set aside nearly \$100,000 "for outreach ministry to be determined by the congregation as a whole and in which the congregation is involved." This was not taken lightly by anyone involved in making the decision.

As we discussed this issue, someone raised the question of whether or not responding to the immediate, time-sensitive needs in our community as a result of the shelter-in-place order in the midst of a pandemic was in keeping with the spirit behind what the funds were set aside to do. The vestry decided that it was – because although we originally did NOT want to give this money away to other organizations, in light of the shelter-in-place order, that was one of the quickest, most appropriate, and safest ways to respond to the needs of our community in this context. None of us could have anticipated the context of being stuck in our homes due to a pandemic when we said that we didn't want to give any of this money away to other organizations!

One might say that in choosing to apply for the Payroll Protection Program loan, the Vestry was operating out of a mindset of scarcity rather than abundance, and it is true that the time-sensitive nature of making that decision in that same meeting in which it was introduced WAS due to deadlines that assumed that if we didn't get our application in soon, there might not be any funds left. However, if we had not applied because we worried that another, more deserving organization might not get any funds if St. John's were to get some, that would also be operating out of a

mindset of scarcity. It is true that St. John's has not seen a significant decline in income as a result of the pandemic – yet – but we HAVE made the decision to close our thrift store, which means we are losing months' worth of income for the Helpful Shop, part of which would have been used to pay the manager's salary. I made a commitment to our employees on Day One of the shelter-in-place order that as long as we had money in the bank, we would continue to pay them their full paycheck, regardless of whether they were able to work a full workweek. The Payroll Protection loan will ensure that we can continue to pay Diane for 16 hours a week even when she does not have enough work to fill 16 hours because of the Helpful Shop closure.

And as for paying the rest of our employees, just because we haven't seen a significant decline in income yet doesn't mean that we won't a few months from now. The wording about who should apply for the loan was small businesses with fewer than 500 employees for whom the "current economic uncertainty" resulting from the pandemic response "[made] [the] loan request necessary to support the ongoing operations of the Applicant." The wording did not say that you had to have insufficient funds in your bank account to make payroll in order to apply for the loan. The diocese advised all parishes to apply for the loans and is applying for a loan themselves, simply because we do not know what our needs will be financially in a few months' time. If we wind up not needing the funds, we can always choose to return them.

The discussion about whether or not St. John's should apply for this loan reminds me a bit of the story of the man stranded on his roof in a flood who refused help from two boats and a helicopter, saying that he had faith that God would save him. He dies and arrives in heaven mad at God. "Why didn't you save me?" he demands angrily. And God replies, "Well, I sent you two boats and a helicopter!"

If we got to the point of not being able to pay our employees and asked God why God didn't provide for us financially during this difficult time, his answer might be, "Well, I sent you the PPP loan application!"

Trusting in God's abundance doesn't mean not taking help offered to us from human sources. Because we trust in God's abundance, we trust that there will be enough for all who apply for the loans. If there isn't, and we wind up with more than our share, we'll help to redistribute it to those in more need.

Whether or not God's abundance will be seen and celebrated in the world depends a lot on us, and on the actions we choose to take with the abundance we have been

given. Today's passage from Acts is a great example of how God's abundance can be more fully recognized and celebrated when God's people share with one another. Pooling resources, as the early church did, and then deciding how to reallocate them to those most in need, is one of the best ways to ensure that everyone's needs are met. I pray that we continue to operate in that spirit both with the PPP funds we may receive, and with our Community Project Fund.

Recognizing and celebrating God's abundance doesn't mean just sitting on our laurels and waiting for abundance to come to us. It means making intentional decisions to accept gifts when we receive them and to not let the wave of generosity end with us, but to continue to pay it forward, to pass along the blessings we have received to others. With God's grace, we will continue to remember this and act accordingly as a parish.