

An Abundance
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First Presbyterian Church of Waukesha
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Psalm 36:5-10

- ⁵ Your steadfast love, O Lord, extends to the heavens,
your faithfulness to the clouds.
- ⁶ Your righteousness is like the mighty mountains,
your judgments are like the great deep;
you save humans and animals alike, O Lord.
- ⁷ How precious is your steadfast love, O God!
All people may take refuge in the shadow of your wings.
- ⁸ They feast on the abundance of your house,
and you give them drink from the river of your delights.
- ⁹ For with you is the fountain of life;
in your light we see light.
- ¹⁰ O continue your steadfast love to those who know you,
and your salvation to the upright of heart!

John 2:1-11

¹ On the third day there was a wedding in Cana of Galilee, and the mother of Jesus was there. ²Jesus and his disciples had also been invited to the wedding. ³When the wine gave out, the mother of Jesus said to him, "They have no wine." ⁴And Jesus said to her, "Woman, what concern is that to you and to me? My hour has not yet come." ⁵His mother said to the servants, "Do whatever he tells you." ⁶Now standing there were six stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification, each holding twenty or thirty gallons. ⁷Jesus said to them, "Fill the jars with water." And they filled them up to the brim. ⁸He said to them, "Now draw some out, and take it to the chief steward." So they took it. ⁹When the steward tasted the water that had become wine, and did not know where it came from (though the servants who had drawn the water knew), the steward called the bridegroom ¹⁰and said to him, "Everyone serves the good wine first, and then the inferior wine after the guests have become drunk. But you have kept the good wine until now." ¹¹Jesus did this, the first of his signs, in Cana of Galilee, and revealed his glory; and his disciples believed in him.

As you may have guessed, if you read the title of this conversation starter, today's readings are about abundance, God's abundance to be specific. We hear it directly in the psalm: "All people take refuge in the shadow of your wings. They feast on the abundance of your house, and you give them drink from the river of your delights." If we're not up for math this early on a cold Sunday morning, we may not have picked up on the lavish abundance in the gospel story of the wedding at Cana. The vessels, the stone water-jars for the Jewish rites of purification held twenty or thirty gallons each and there were six of them. That means Jesus provided 120 to 180 gallons of wine for

a wedding party. Let's meet in the middle and say there were 150 gallons – that means 4,800 servings (four ounces) of wine. Even if there were three hundred people there, they would each have sixteen servings available to them. That is abundance.

We may read rudeness into Jesus' reluctance to provide wine, yet in that time, and from the gospel-writer John's perspective, Jesus was simply stating that a wedding was not central to his ministry. "What concern is that to you and to me?" And, if we had the chance, I suspect most of us would ask Jesus for healing over a cover-up of a social faux pas. When he does decide to help, it's not in a small way. He gives profusely. Our psalm attributes the same to God, as in the implied unending supply from which to drink that is a river. God's abundance comes without calculation – no calculation of what will be left for God, no calculation of what will be owed to God, no calculation of cost to God. Only God is God.

And God's generosity isn't bound to only steadfast love. It isn't bound to only faithfulness. It isn't bound to only righteousness or to only salvation. If God had named an aim of having such abundance, it would be to give it away. Think to all the stories of Jesus healing and caring for people – over and over we hear of how crowds came to him, of how they came for days, and nowhere do we read that they were turned away. The abundance was not to be held onto, is not to be held onto, but to be given away.

In recent years scholars at the University of British Columbia conducted some tests about our own human giving. The earlier of two studies involved toddlers and a monkey puppet. Their report states "Twenty toddlers, all a month or two shy of their second birthday, were introduced to a monkey puppet who, they were told, 'liked treats.' Soon afterward, an experimenter 'found' eight treats—either Teddy Grahams or Goldfish crackers—and gave them to the toddler, saying all the treats belonged to that child. Then the experimenter performed three more steps, in varying order: found another treat and gave it to the monkey while the child watched; found another treat, gave it to the child, and asked him or her to give it to the monkey; or asked the child to share one of his or her own eight treats with the monkey...Independent observers rated the toddlers' happiness in all three scenarios. The results show that the children appeared happier when they gave away a treat than when they received a treat, and they displayed the greatest happiness when they gave away one of their own treats; this 'costly giving' even made them happier than giving away a found treat at no cost to themselves."¹

¹ http://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/being_kind_makes_kids_happy

The researchers followed up this study to see if the results were transferable to young adults. They describe the process saying, “In an initial experiment, we approached people on a university campus and gave them a \$5 or \$20 bill to spend by the end of the day (Dunn, Aknin, & Norton, 2008). We instructed half the participants to spend the money on themselves (‘personal spending’), and half to spend the money on someone else (‘prosocial spending’). That evening, people who had been assigned to spend the money on someone else reported feeling happier mood[s] over the course of the day than those assigned to spend the money on themselves. Interestingly, the amount of money they got had no bearing on their happiness.”²

They went further and found, “When we described the experiment to other participants, however, their predictions were doubly wrong: They believed that they would be happier spending more money (\$20 vs. \$5), and that they would be happier spending it on themselves. Thus, people’s daily spending choices may be guided by flawed intuitions about the relationship between money and happiness. Indeed, research suggests that just being reminded of money may make people less attuned to the needs of others (Vohs, Mead, & Goode, 2006). Thinking about money may propel us toward using our financial resources to benefit ourselves, but spending money on others can provide a more effective route to increasing our own happiness.”³

Treats and money are tangible and measurable and, thus, suitable currency for studies which need to be quantifiable. The foundation of the results, however, has nothing to do with physical goods. You may not feel like you have much to give materially and the thought of it might make you feel exactly as they found – “just being reminded of money may make [you] less attuned to the needs of others” and “thinking about money may propel [you] toward using [y]our financial resources to benefit [yourself].” This flawed intuition, as the researchers called it, reminds us again that only God is God. Yet in our very humanness, we have been created in God’s likeness. It is not beyond us to be lavish with what we have: forgiveness, kindness, so many intangibles of such great value.

As you consider how you might be lavish today, and tomorrow and the day after, consider these words from Mary Oliver’s “Reckless Poem.”

Just yesterday I watched an ant crossing a path, through the
tumbled pine needles she toiled.

And I thought: she will never live another life but this one.

² <http://nrs.harvard.edu/urn-3:HUL.InstRepos:11189976>

³ Ibid.

And I thought: if she lives her life with all her strength
is she not wonderful and wise?
And I continued this up the miraculous pyramid of everything
until I came to myself.⁴

Let us pray: Generous God, open our hands, and our hearts, to give with abandon as you so easily do. Amen.

⁴ <https://www.loc.gov/poetry/180/080.html>