

“Claiming God’s Abundance”

October 20, 2024

Scripture: Isaiah 55:1-2, 6-9, 12-13; Luke 14:15-23

When was the last time you attended a banquet? Not just a dinner party or a buffet, but a real, full-blown, multiple course banquet. I have to say, I haven’t been to many over the years. But I have been to a few dinners where it seemed like the food could never run out, where I was sure there was no way all of it could possibly be eaten. It’s not often we have a direct experience with that kind of abundance. It’s not often when we don’t find ourselves worrying if there’s going to be enough, even if that fear is unwarranted. Most of us are conditioned through our families or through life experiences to be a little careful about how much we take, to be sure to save a little for later.

God, in Isaiah’s understanding, wants to bring an end to that sort of worry. The people have been through terrible trauma in exile in Babylon. Over the years they’ve become accustomed to living with scarcity. They’re like a goldfish that swims around in circles in a little bowl for so long that when put into a tub or a pond, just keeps swimming in that small circle because it can’t comprehend anything larger. In exile God’s people were diminished, not so much in numbers as in vision. So, the offer of abundance God makes to them sounds like a foreign language. They can’t imagine a world where they could have all they want and more without money, without price, without end.

That’s the kind of abundance God is trying to instill in the hearts of these people. It’s a way to recondition them for the work of rebuilding they’ll need to do when they return to Israel. Because what they’re about to find back home is nothing but rubble. God is offering them a vision of abundance that can sustain them when they face the reality of devastation. Holding onto that vision, claiming it as their own, is the only the way they can move into the future with hope. Many of them might feel like they’re being punished to have to deal with so much turmoil and destruction, but God promises them abundant forgiveness and refuses to be held to their standards: “For my thoughts are not your thoughts, nor are your ways, my ways, says the Lord.” Where we see the insurmountable challenge and hopelessness of scarcity, God sees the possibility of abundance; God offers a new vision.

But often that vision is hard for us to grasp. When we consider the things we’d like to accomplish as a community, too often we limit ourselves before we’ve had a chance to dream. We assume there’ll never be enough to carry out our hopes. So, we walk away from them; we allow ourselves to be defeated by the illusion of scarcity before we’ve even tried to claim abundance. It’s disheartening and demoralizing. And it’s not just us; we live in a society that promotes it. Over and over we’re told we must put aside our ambitions, our hopes and dreams because they’re too costly; there’s just not enough to go around. After awhile we give up trying to imagine something more. The feast God is offering becomes so remote it feels like a fairy tale and not to be taken seriously.

The banquet Jesus describes was prepared by someone who wanted nothing more than to be generous to his neighbors. So, when everything’s prepared he sends his servant out to gather

the guests who have been invited. Something you may not have caught: all the guests who decline must have at some point accepted. Why else would the servant go to them? They accepted and then refused, using the lamest excuses you can imagine: someone has to see a piece of land they bought. Really? They bought land sight unseen? And you don't test oxen after you buy them. And didn't they know they were getting married before they accepted the invitation? These excuses are ridiculous. It's no wonder the man throwing the party was angry. But instead of just forgetting the whole thing, he decides to open it up to anyone he can find. The offer of abundance doesn't depend on our cooperation. It's available to anyone willing to claim it.

If we identify with the people who make lame excuses, this story becomes a judgment story. But if we identify with all the others who are brought in from the highways and byways, the poor, the crippled, the blind, then it becomes a message of hope. We're not left out, even though we have so many imperfections and flaws. We're included at God's banquet and we're invited to bring with us our whole selves, as we are to enter the feast.

Claiming God's abundance and sharing in the feast God prepares is at once the greatest joy and the greatest challenge we face. In so many ways it feels like we're losing ground. We see so many expressions of our faith we don't recognize, so much intolerance and judgmentalism. And demographically fewer people identify faith as something important in their lives than ever before. How do we continue to be relevant? How does a generous, loving, accepting version of Christianity make any headway against so much indifference and hostility? It's hard under those conditions to make a claim for God's abundance. But I think our best answer to those challenges is to live joyfully with hope and not let ourselves get lost in excuses that keep us away from the feast.

Today we're dedicating our pledges for the coming year. Sometimes we think of those as a sort of tax, an obligation that's expected of us. But this year I encourage you to think of it as your way of claiming God's abundance. In the face of so many demands being made on you, so many costs, it can be hard to recognize the hope of abundance. This is your chance to defy the forces in the world that say there's not enough to go around. It's your chance to make a claim for abundance in a world convinced of scarcity. God is working through us to invite the world to a feast beyond imagining, a feast where everyone has a place at the table, where everyone is welcome and received with joy. What for you is a meaningful way to reflect that abundance through your pledge?

Some of you have already made that decision. Others may still be working on it. In a little bit we'll be gathering your pledge cards; if you forgot to bring one we have plenty you can use. If you haven't already, I'd like you to take a moment as you're listening to our prayers of the people and the call to discipleship to think about what is a meaningful pledge amount for you. I don't know what that is; it's entirely up to you. But whatever it is, I hope you'll think of it as your attempt to claim God's abundance in your life. And as your contribution to our collective effort to make that claim as a congregation. We are here to offer God's feast to the world. We are here to welcome all, from the highways and byways, no matter what their condition or past, to welcome all to the feast. Your contribution is vital to helping us reveal God's presence in the world, to being a place of hope and healing for all. The world needs what we have to offer. The world needs a place where abundance is proclaimed and everyone is welcome and loved.

This morning I hope you'll accept that invitation and claim God's abundance with joy.

Amen