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Sermon for July 26, 2021

Looking at Our Challenges with God's Abundance

As you probably know, the summer Olympics started over the weekend. And if you've been watching, or have watched in the past, you know how amazing it is to watch these athletes. Not only is their ability a thing to behold and the excitement of who's going to win the medal with so much coming down to a single moment. But in addition to all that, they are constantly making history, breaking records, and doing things we never thought the human body could do. You'd think there would be some point where you just can't run or swim faster or do any more flips in the air. But they break records and push the limits of what's possible year after year.

We may look at what they're trying to do with disbelief, thinking how *do* they do it? But I'm sure the athletes don't. They can't go in thinking "there's no way." They can't go in ambivalent with a, "I don't know let's see" attitude. They have to look at the impossible task and believe it can happen. And then plan the next steps accordingly. Like, that's the goal, so how you get there in terms of training, diet, technique, or coaching?

It's the sort of perspective that Jesus was trying to help the disciples with in our story from John's gospel. Jesus and the disciples had their own impossible challenge to face. There are five thousand people, it's dinner time, and there's no food. Jesus looks to the disciples and asks them, what should we do? It says he was doing it to test them, which sounds a little off-putting. But we can think of it more like training. When you're learning something the teacher invites you in to think about a problem and try figuring it out. And if it's hard material you're probably not going to have the answer the first time. But being asked to think about it as if you might know gets your mind engaging the problem in another way.

And that's what Jesus is doing. He's trying to get the disciples to look at the challenges they come up against from a different perspective. When he asks Phillip, Phillip can't help but look at the problem in the traditional way. He thinks we can't afford it. We don't have enough. Therefore it won't work.

And then, somewhere in all of the discussion, a young boy hears and comes forward and offers his lunch. The people are told to sit on the grass like a picnic. Jesus blesses the food, they pass it around in baskets, and everyone gets as much as they want.

When we read this story, it usually sparks the question of HOW it happened. Was it that the bread divinely multiplied? Or was it that the boy bringing his lunch inspired other acts of generosity. Seeing the boy put his meal forward made other people want to contribute and put things in the baskets going around. So people were both giving and receiving and it turned out there was enough. Kind of like the stone soup story where all the villagers tell the hungry travelers they have no food until the travelers put the stone

and water in the pot and that initial act prompts villagers to come out and it turns out they have carrots, onion, potatoes and collectively all that is needed for a great meal.

We don't know exactly what happened that day. But it's notable that it's the ONLY miracle recorded in ALL 4 gospels. In scholarship, there's something called the "multiple attestation theory." It means that the more something is recorded in different sources, the more likely it is that it actually happened. So whatever happened that day, something got people's attention. Enough to talk about it and write about it and tell the story to others.

Whatever happened, however, it happened, the thing we -- as followers of Christ -- need to see is what Jesus was trying to get his disciples to see. He was trying to help them see their challenges in a new way. To not look at the obstacle and have the first thought be "we can't," "we don't have enough," "it'll never work." Because statements like that are a conversation stopper. And if we make that declaration, it's a self fulfilling prophecy. If we say we don't have enough, and we can't, that's probably what'll happen.

Instead, Jesus wants them and us to look at our challenges with a sense of God's abundance. Now, looking at a challenge with a sense of God's abundance is different than wishful thinking or blind faith. Blind faith would be to look at the hungry crowd and say, pizzas coming. We don't know how. We just gotta believe. Any time Lord.

By contrast, looking with a sense of God's abundance is to look at with the knowledge that God is a good and generous God. God is with us. God is in us. God has given us the things we need. Looking with a sense of God's abundance is persevering for the best. Not giving up at first sight.

Looking with a sense of God's abundance is to draw on the depths of what is in us. Gifts of our intellect. Our hearts. The resources around us. The people around us. And we look at these good gifts and ask: How do these things play a part in helping us overcome the challenges?

And actually, even the critics or the ones who doubt play a role. Philip says we don't have money. Ok. If we listen to a voice like Philip we say, that's a good point. How might we get the money? Or, in this case, how might we get to our goal in some less traditional way? Or Andrew, brings the child and his basket forward and in the same breath dismisses it. And yet, he's presenting the solution at the same time.

If we want to follow in this way that Jesus is teaching the question to ask is HOW.

I heard a great example of this sort of perspective in an interview the other day. In it, author Shawn Achor was talking about the old glass half empty or half full metaphor. And he said that we've fixated on "is the glass half full or half empty," judging ourselves or others for seeing things the wrong way. But he said, "I could care less about the glass. The question is how are we gonna fill it?" And then we scan the world around us to understand how. The world is the pitcher.

What are the challenges we face? What does it mean to look at them with a spirit of abundance and ask HOW?

It could be finances. Challenges of parenting. Health. Issues in relationships. Covid decisions. How do we look at these with God's abundance?

In our city, I know many of us are discouraged by housing issues and seeing our neighbors suffer on the streets. It seems like an impossible thing. So how do we look at it with God's abundance?

Or in our church? The question of how to feed thousands of people has been our question this last year. There are other questions, too. How do we continue work we're called to in a changing world? Where Christianity has less of a place, but that needs the love of God, healing, practical acts of Christ's love as much as ever?

How are we gonna feed the five thousand? How are we gonna fill this glass? How are we gonna pursue the things that God has put in our hearts for us and our world?

Jesus wants us to see the challenges in a new way. As God does. As he did. May our hearts be filled with a sense of God's abundance as we go out and ask HOW.