

Overflowing with Abundance

Second of three messages in the 2021 Stewardship Focus “Overflowing”

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- Luke 12:22-31 (Good News Translation) ²² Then Jesus said to the disciples, “And so I tell you not to worry about the food you need to stay alive or about the clothes you need for your body. ²³ Life is much more important than food, and the body much more important than clothes. ²⁴ Look at the crows: they don't plant seeds or gather a harvest; they don't have storage rooms or barns; God feeds them! You are worth so much more than birds! ²⁵ Can any of you live a bit longer^[a] by worrying about it? ²⁶ If you can't manage even such a small thing, why worry about the other things? ²⁷ Look how the wildflowers grow: they don't work or make clothes for themselves. But I tell you that not even King Solomon with all his wealth had clothes as beautiful as one of these flowers. ²⁸ It is God who clothes the wild grass—grass that is here today and gone tomorrow, burned up in the oven. Won't he be all the more sure to clothe you? What little faith you have! ²⁹ “So don't be all upset, always concerned about what you will eat and drink. ³⁰ (For the pagans of this world are always concerned about all these things.) Your Father knows that you need these things. ³¹ Instead, be concerned with his Kingdom, and he will provide you with these things.
- 2 Corinthians 9:8 (New International Version) ⁸ And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work.

Fifteen years ago, American novelist David Foster Wallace began a commencement address to the graduating class of Kenyon College with this little story:

There are these two young fish swimming along and they happen to meet an older fish swimming the other way, who nods at them and says “Morning, boys. How’s the water?” And the two young fish swim on for a bit, and then eventually one of them looks over at the other and goes “What... is water?”... The point of the fish story is merely that the most obvious, important realities are often the ones that are hardest to see and talk about.¹

In our context, perhaps the question we should be wrestling with all the time is the deceptively simple question, “What is blessing?” Because we live our lives bathed in blessing, but it may be so pervasive, so constant, that like the air we breathe, we lose sight of the blessings all around us.

We take the air that we breathe for granted. My brother and sister-in-law don’t. They live in Eugene, Oregon, a city approaching 200,000 residents and home to the University of Oregon. A few weeks ago the Holiday Farm wildfire burned nearly 300 square miles of forest and meadow, village and town, coming within about 25 miles of Eugene. For days and days the fire cast an orangish-gray pall over the city. With nearly 900 wildfires across the state,² Oregonians were very aware of the air they were breathing because it tasted foul and was irritating, and not at all good for even a healthy person, much less someone with medical issues.

¹ <https://fs.blog/2012/04/david-foster-wallace-this-is-water/> accessed 9/28/2020

² https://apps.odef.oregon.gov/DIVISIONS/protection/fire_protection/fires/dailyFireReps.asp accessed 9/28/2020

No, we don't want to take the air that we breathe for granted, but neither do we want it to take devastating wildfires to remind us of the preciousness of what we have.

It's a challenge to realize and remember to appreciate the air we breathe, "the water we swim in," the lives we live that are constantly overflowing with blessing.

Today we heard from Luke's gospel a story similar to the more familiar version in the gospel of Matthew's Sermon on the Mount. Seeking to dispel people's anxiousness about daily life, Jesus said, "And so I tell you not to worry about the food you need to stay alive or about the clothes you need for your body."³ Then he points out that crows receive food from God even though they don't plant seeds or harvest crops or put up canned goods for the winter or push carts through the grocery aisles.

Jesus points out that the wildflowers of the meadow don't go shopping for clothes or trace patterns and stitch up their outfits, and yet their natural beauty rivals the luxurious robes and jewels of a queen or king. Reminding his listeners of the care God gives to wildlife and wildflowers, Jesus delivers his tag line, "Are you not of more value than they?" Jesus was reminding us of the abundance of blessing that fills our lives regardless of whether or not we realize it.

The scripture verse that's my focus for today is the 8th verse of 2 Corinthians Chapter 9. Listen again to that verse from the New International Version translation: "And God is able to bless you abundantly, so that in all things at all times, having all that you need, you will abound in every good work." I hope you picked up on Paul's emphasis through the use of repetition: "...all things..." "...all times..." "...all that you need..."

And that's not "all." Paul said that the result of God generously blessing us with what we need is that we will be able to "abound in every good work." Think about the word "abound." It means not limited, not contained, not bound. It also is related to another word in that verse: "abundance." Abundance is what you have when something abounds. The Latin root for the word abound means "overflowing." Our lives are overflowing with blessing.

But too often we forget to notice.

In a meeting recently I heard a young man suggest that one of the challenges of our day is to redirect our attention. Because of the upheaval caused by the pandemic, many of us expend a lot of our emotional energy focusing on what's changed, what's different, what we can't do, what we don't have.

Those are realities, but focusing on what we can't do and what we don't have ignores the abundance of blessings that continue to overflow in our lives even in these uncertain and unsettling days.

Yes, focusing on what we don't have can cause us to overlook what we do have. I remember being on a car trip when our youngest son was probably 4 or 5 years old. We stopped for ice cream, and I brought a carrying tray back to the car with one-scoop cones for Mary and me, and the older boys. For the little one I had ordered a "baby cone," a smaller cone topped with a generous dollop of soft-service ice cream.

When the youngest saw that, he started whining and complaining that he didn't want it. Pointing to the carrier in my hand he cried that he wanted a "real" ice cream

³ Luke 12:22 Good News Translation

cone. I kept offering it to him, trying to get him to accept it. "Taste it," I said, "see if you like it." But he kept whining and complaining.

So, I took the baby cone and in one movement crushed and stuffed the entire thing in my mouth and swallowed it. Not one of my more mature moments of parenting.... I still wonder if he learned any lesson besides his father can eat a baby cone in one bite. I still wonder if his childlike mind started to realize that focusing on what we don't have can cause us to look right past what we do have.

Cancellations and closures and restrictions and deprivations are realities in these days. But focusing on what we can't do and what we don't have ignores the abundance of blessings that continue to overflow in our lives even in these uncertain and unsettling days. That young man who I heard speak in a meeting recently suggested that we deliberately, expectantly look for the positive that can still be found in our lives and in our world.

What are our opportunities, our blessings? During this season we are encouraged to reflect on our response as stewards, as caretakers of God's abundant blessings. In 2 Corinthians Chapter 9, verse 12, the apostle Paul reminds Christians of his day and ours that our lives are "overflowing in many expressions of thanks to God." Yes, God blesses us abundantly. Blessing is "the water that we swim in" and "the air that we breathe." Let's thank God that in all things, at all times, having all that we need, we are able to abound in every good work.