

Matthew 14: 13-21

8-6-17

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A couple stands before a pastor and, in the service of marriage promises to love one another "in sickness and health, for richer for poorer, for better or worse"-in other words, promises to love one another with everything they've got.

Is this wise? Is it wise to love with such extravagance, to hold nothing back, to love without limit, "until death us do part"?

Shouldn't the bride and the groom hold something back? Shouldn't they carefully consider just how much love they can muster for one another and yet still maintain their cherished individuality?

No, says the church. Go ahead, love with unbridled enthusiasm and extravagance. Love is a renewable resource. In giving you receive, when it comes to love.

Maybe love is a spendthrift. Maybe love isn't good at arithmetic.

Jesus has been doing much good. Now he's exhausted, so has withdrawn to a deserted place. But by the time he arrives, word has spread and the place is anything but deserted. There is a great crowd. Jesus somehow summons up even more compassion. Matthew says he "had compassion for them and cured their sick." It grows late. The people are hungry, and the disciples recommend sending the crowds away. Jesus commands his disciples to feed the hungry crowds. The disciples ask, "Where on earth, with these scarce resources, where are we expected to find

food for so many? Five loaves, two fish-that's no match for such a great crowd. Here is the tension that can only be resolved through some fresh, miraculous, powerful intervention. So Jesus takes what seems like terribly meager resources in hand, and there is enough. In fact, there is an overabundance of food.

Scarcity in the face of great need is contrasted here with the gracious, extravagant abundance that is offered at the hand of Jesus. We note that the story does not simply end with "and all ate" (v. 20), which would be miraculous enough in itself. Matthew reports that "they all ate and were filled." They were fulfilled, satisfied, not just temporarily had their stomachs full.

The story does not even end there with such a miracle. They took up what was left over and 12 baskets were filled. There is not only fulfillment, but a surplus. That's the way it is with Jesus. Even in a wilderness, even at the close of day as night is falling, if Jesus is there, there is fulfillment, abundance, extravagance, an overflowing of graciousness.

"Let's ask Jane to take on this job," said one of the members of the planning committee. "Jane always does such a good job on anything she undertakes." Widespread agreement in the group.

I, as her pastor, said, "Now, do you really think this is fair to Jane? Jane already has two or three jobs in the church. She is one of our busiest members, one of our hardest workers."

"That's just my point," said the person. "Everybody knows, if you want a job done right, always ask the busiest person to do the job. Busy people always seem to be the people who are able to find time somehow to do even more."

"I love my family; I would do anything in the world for my family." You often hear folks say that. But that's not saying much. After all, our family looks like us. We parents have much of our own egos tied up in our children. But I know parents who are able to love even beyond the boundaries of their own kin.

"Pastor, we decided to adopt the foster child we've been keeping, such a dear little thing. The parents have given him up for adoption, and we think that we ought to do it," she said.

And I, as the ever-cautious pastor, asked, "Do you really think that's wise? You already have three children. You are a great mother, but don't you think there are limits? Aren't there limits to how much love you can give?"

"When it comes to love," she said, "I haven't yet found the limits. From my experience, love feeds on love; it grows by being given away. The more love you give, the more love you seem to have. That's how it's been in my experience."

And you know, she's right.

I read an article where the faculty at Duke University was discussing the problem of "grade inflation." It's been a real problem in American higher education the last couple of decades. College work that once was given a C, is now routinely graded with a B+. The old "gentleman's C" has become the "gentleperson's B." A few years ago showed something like 90 percent of all the students at Harvard got A's in nearly all of their college courses. To many, this grade inflation bespeaks a lack of standards, a laxity in expectation, if not downright dishonesty about a student's work. So, the faculty was discussing what they could do to tighten up.

"I confess," said one of the professors, "I'm the sort of teacher who considers any student earning anything less than an A to be a sign of my failure as a teacher. This may sound crazy, but I'd like to be so good a teacher that every student I have does her very best. I'd like all of them to get an A. I never found a student who learned anything from a failing grade."

I am reminded of all those strange little stories that Jesus told about a farmer who sows too much seed. Most of the seed was wasted, falling on the wrong sort of soil. But when you are sowing good seed in bad soil, well, sometimes you have to overdo it a bit. The seed that did manage to germinate and take root and produced, said Jesus, abundant harvest.

Or in John 2: The wine gives out at a party after a wedding, and what does Jesus do? He turns water to wine! Not just some water into a bit of wine. He makes, according to John's estimate, about 180 gallons of the best tasting wine they ever had. Isn't that a great deal of wine? He didn't just turn water into wine, which would have been quite a sign in itself. He made 180 gallons of wine! An abundance!

Or the father of that wayward prodigal son - he didn't just welcome back his son. (We would have done that.) No, the father welcomed him back with a huge, expensive, wild party that was extravagant!

It wasn't that the good Samaritan stopped and helped the wounded man in the ditch. (We would have done that.) It was the way he stopped. The Samaritan put the wounded man in his car. He took the man to the hospital. He told the doctors, "Here, here's everything - all my credit cards, my checkbook, everything. I'll be back here in a week and, if that's not enough money to treat this man's wounds, I'll give you even more."

I don't think he even knew the wounded man. Isn't that just a bit overly generous on the part of the Samaritan?

And so Jesus said, at the end of that series of stories about parties, that when just one sinner comes home, turns and repents, just one, heaven throws a huge party. So many parties! You know how expensive a party can be here on earth. Imagine what good catering costs in heaven! Extravagant!

Jesus told stories of such abundance and extravagance overflowing. God is like that. God could have made one shade of flower - say, a red poppy - and this would be miracle enough for most of us. And yet look at the colors and the shapes of the millions upon millions of flowers. Wouldn't you call such colorful creativity excessive?

And all the rich diversity of races, all the colors of people, all the diversity of shape and size, of sound and sense. This exuberant Creator overdoes almost everything. Here is a God who, when he started creating people or flowers or birds or stars, just didn't know when to stop. Perhaps, with God, creativity is a renewable resource.

I know people who have faced crisis upon crisis, and still they get back up and they ask for more. They suggest to me that courage, determination, maybe like love, may be a renewable resource.

Jesus tells a parable of a boss who called his employees together and gave to them everything he owned. Every single cent. And then he went on a journey. The employee who got half of the property went out, wheeled and dealed, and doubled his holdings. The one who got a fourth of the property did the same. But a prudent, cautious employee took about the eighth that he got, buried it in a field, and he kept it all safe and sound.

And boy was that boss mad at that cautious, prudent employee when he returned!

You know, there seems to be something built right into the nature of this God that tends toward extravagance and abundance.

And so Jesus goes to a hillside to teach. And look at the crowd who showed up! Must be a thousand of them out there if there's a dozen. There is hunger; night is falling. What to do?

"Send them back to town so they can buy something for themselves to eat," advised the disciples.

"But what have you got?" Jesus asks.

And we look-nothing here but a few loaves, a couple of miserable little cold fish.

Jesus then takes what we have, he blesses it, he breaks it, he gives it. And, wonder of wonders, it's enough!

No, Matthew says, "All ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, 12 baskets full."

See, the thing was, there wasn't just enough. There was more than enough.

Let that be a lesson for us.

Let us pray.

Lord, impress us more with your gifts than with our need. Help us in all our doings to lean on your extravagant, effusive love. Amen.

