



**PRACTICING ABUNDANCE**  
**SCRIPTURE: ISAIAH 55: 1-5; MATTHEW 14: 13-21**  
**GRACE COVENANT PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH, ASHEVILLE, NC**  
**August 6, 2017**

The Rev. Dr. Marcia Mount Shoop, Pastor

Yesterday under a venerable old tree in the high desert of New Mexico, people gathered to remember one of the greatest practitioners of abundance this world has ever seen.

The Community Farm in Santa Fe always seemed to have more than enough of what people needed—nourishment, community, connection, wisdom, friendship, purpose, hope, and love.

John E. Stephenson fed the community from his land in Santa Fe County—all his produce was donated to agencies that served the homeless, the hungry, the elderly, the struggling, the challenged.

All his farm hands were volunteers. And they got fed, too, not only from the vegetables and fruit and honey, but from the communities of people who gathered there, from the chance to reconnect with the ground that feeds us.

Mr. Stephenson made deliveries in his old yellow Volkswagen pick up truck. People all over Santa Fe and agencies that numbered well over 25, welcomed that truck as a source of fresh food and faithful friendship.

This past Thursday would have been John Stephenson's 103<sup>rd</sup> birthday—he died just a few weeks ago—on the evening of the summer solstice.

He died just a few days after many of us gathered under our own venerable old tree for worship by our garden in June. That day under the tree when we gathered in the sanctuary of her branches, in the sacred space of the things that grow here, I told you about John Stephenson—a farmer, a man of remarkable integrity and generosity, a man who taught me many things the year I spent in service on the farm after college as a mission volunteer for the Presbyterian Church.

*He taught me about heirloom seeds, about the sacred quality of water, about letting fields lie fallow, and about using insects as allies for controlling other insects.*

And he showed me what it looks like to practice abundance.

The practice of abundance is the practice of faith—daily expressions of connection and trust and nourishment that form and feed Jesus' more excellent way. And it all starts with how we understand our presence here on earth in the first place.

John served in WWII in the cavalry. Three times during his service overseas the various platoons he was assigned to were completely wiped out. And each time, for a seemingly random reason, John was spared.

Once someone pulled him from his troops to be a translator for a language he told them he didn't speak and so he didn't go with his company on their ill-fated mission. Another time he was asked to carry a message to someone instead of go with his company. Again, they were completely wiped out and he survived. And still another time he was pulled out at the last minute for an unexpected change in assignment only to hear later that had he stayed, he would not have survived.

He understood his life not as the result of God's favor, but as a call to God's service. He didn't believe his life got traded for anyone else's, nor did he see God's grace as a zero-sum game. He simply believed that his being here was not something to take lightly.

He used every gift God had given him—his gifts for forestry, for farming, for connecting with people through the simplest things—telling them a story, showing them how to pick corn (shake hands with it). He used both his faith and his amazing strength (he was a world record weight lifter in his 70s and even 80s) to be fully alive.

His faith found expression in the way he defined his life: HE DID NOT ENCOUNTER THE NEEDS OF OTHERS AS A THREAT.

John Stephenson staked his life on the simple creed of there is enough to go around. He lived by the doctrine of God will provide.

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Christianity was born out of such a disposition—out of enough to go around, out of God will provide.

And our faith traditions' DNA also carries with it strains of fearfulness and anxiety about scarcity.

Our faith forbearers struggled with whether to define their identity as people of God in terms of scarcity or in terms of plentitude.<sup>1</sup>

And this tension remains in Christianity today.

Is Christian identity about who we are not? Or is Christian identity about who we are?

The biblical canon gives us plenty to go on for both. Our tradition has a psyche divided against itself—between scarcity and abundance.

That conflict is live in our current American Christian context.

- Do we build walls or do we open doors?
- Do we see those different than ourselves as rivals or threats, or do we see diversity as God's provision for human flourishing?
- Does Christianity draw cultural lines or does Christianity cross cultural boundaries?

The way we answer these questions has never been more pressing. We can so easily mistake consumption for abundance. We can so easily misunderstand the results of systemic disadvantage for evidence that scarcity is just the way things are or that deprivation is someone else's fault.

Practicing abundance is not simply about generosity, it is about trusting God has provided the world with what we ALL need in the first place. In the practice of abundance, a mentality of plentitude is where we start.

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The feeding of the 5000 (or maybe it was 20,000 since they didn't count the women and children) is a story of abundance—not scarcity.

It is the only story of Jesus' ministry that is in all four of the gospels. It is actually depicted 6 times in the New Testament.

This story should have a unique hold on us—and yet, we struggle as Jesus' own followers to understand abundance, much less to practice it.

And even those who were closest to Jesus struggled to trust the abundance that he showed them everyday. Matthew's gospel frames the disciples' struggle not in terms of an intellectual misunderstanding or a math problem they couldn't figure out how to solve, but as a lack of faith—they struggled to trust Jesus' confidence that there is enough, that God will provide.

So much of contemporary scholarship has emptied the miracle out of this passage—maybe to make it more intellectually palatable to believers like us—who find it easier to intellectualize things than to trust God's unlikely and even miraculous ways of providing for us and of healing us.

Some scholars tell us to read the story as purely symbolic—a template for Eucharistic language, and that the bread shared was probably just a cursory crumb for each person—but that they weren't really fed a full meal.

Other scholars say the fish and loaves were not multiplied, but that Jesus' willingness to share elicited sharing in everyone else—either out of inspiration or

guilt—everybody got their lunch boxes out and started sharing what they had and it turned out there was enough to go around after all.

And still others scholarship suggest that the feeding in the field that day worked because people didn't eat as much as they normally did so there was enough to go around.

You are the only one who can answer the question: what does your faith call you to believe happened that day, that day when throngs of people came to be healed by Jesus—a man who captured their imaginations, a man who found a way to meet their deepest needs.

Where do you have the courage to recognize and receive such abundance, the abundance that Jesus provides for you in your deepest needs?

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Every one of us has a life that could have been different at many turns—choices and unexpected twists that meant we have another chance to make our lives count.

Jesus saves every one of us, time and time again, from the deadness of hoarding, from the disease of grasping, from the delusions of otherizing the world around us.

Every time we gather at the Lord's Table, we learn again the simple beginning steps of practicing abundance:

- Come honest about what you are hungry for so you can get what you need.
- Come as you are, there is a place reserved just for you.
- Seating is not limited, so don't be afraid to bring a friend and stay for a while.
- God will provide—and there will even be leftovers—that each of us can use to feed a world hungry for such good news.

Jesus' feeding of the 5000 was Communion. And what happened in that field resonates with a new clarity for me today knowing that John Stephenson has tasted eternity. I can hear the sound of an old yellow truck ambling through the crowds gathered for healing, gathered with their deepest needs exposed—and I can just see him now, handing out bags of sweet corn and bushels of McIntosh apples.

And all are eating and all are being filled.

Thanks be to God.

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<sup>1</sup> For further exploration of this tension in monotheistic traditions see Regina Schwartz, *The Curse of Cain: The Violent Legacy of Monotheism*. (University of Chicago Press, 1997).