

“Abundance Where We Are”

Rev. David Gregory

November 21, 2021

Pentecost 27



Cornucopia
David Galchutt

Readings

2 Corinthians 9:8-11

from *The Message* by Eugene Peterson

God can pour on the blessings in astonishing ways so that you're ready for anything and everything, more than just ready to do what needs to be done. As one psalmist puts it,

*God throws caution to the winds,
giving to the needy in reckless abandon.
God's right-living, right-giving ways
never run out, never wear out.*

This most generous God who gives seed to the farmer that becomes bread for your meals is more than extravagant with you, and gives you something you can then give away, which grows into full-formed lives, robust in Spirit, wealthy in every way, so that you can be generous in every way, producing with us great praise.

Mark Nepo

in *The Book of Awakening: Having the Life You Want by Being Present to the Life You Have*

How often do we lose sight of what we're really after, insisting on all or nothing, when there is so much abundance wherever we are and so many opportunities that can help us on our way?

Today is the culmination of our season of giving and gratitude. As we enter the week of the Thanksgiving holiday, we should acknowledge that in our tradition, gratitude does not require its own holiday. It is an ongoing spiritual practice that mirrors something fundamental to who we are as human beings. There is a Divine Generosity that exists at the core of every atom, every molecule, every cell of living beings. This Generosity is another name for the One of Many Names, this Holy Spirit who is the Fire of Life.

I would like to think that in another year we might see some feasting and celebration in this space to match what we enjoyed before the pandemic, but for two seasons in a row we have been prevented from coming together and feasting. We used to gather around tables laden with delicious food as a demonstration of the abundance we enjoy. As the familiar parable reminds us, “The harvest is truly plenteous,” and the celebration of that abundance should never make us insensitive to the needs of others around us, some in our very own communities who struggle to feed themselves and their loved ones.

Years ago while living in Rochester, New York, I began to notice that grocery chains were pulling their stores out of certain areas of the inner city, favoring the wealthier suburbs and leaving what have become known as “food deserts,” where the only available food to be found was in convenience stores, big-box drug stores, or gas stations. The highly processed foods in these areas are highly caloric and nearly devoid of nutrition. Admittedly, the growing season in the northeast is quite different from in California, and while the abundance of fresh food seems greater here, getting that fresh food to people who need it, especially to the unhoused population remains a justice issue as well as a huge challenge. I hope I never lose sight of the fact that the healthy choices I enjoy are not enjoyed by all. It humbles me. It makes me grateful, and it prompts me to give.

The feasting that most of us will enjoy this week can also be seen as metaphor for something even larger, though just as universal. There is a poverty of soul that expresses itself in a spiritual hunger and a spiritual thirst, and I hesitate to even use that terminology, since it implies a dualism between body and spirit. It is this dual thinking that allows some to think that they can tend to someone else’s spiritual needs without feeding their literal stomachs. It’s not possible. The Apostle Paul may have had his own problems with dual thinking, but even he (or someone writing in his name) expressed great concern for people across the Roman Empire who were destitute and hungry. In the second letter to the Corinthian church he refers to a collection for the saints, an offering that was being received across entire regions to meet the needs of people gathered around the teachings of Jesus, groups that he called “churches” in impoverished areas. This is the core of his appeal:

This most generous God who gives seed to the farmer that becomes bread for your meals is more than extravagant with you, and gives you something you can then give away, which grows into full-formed lives, robust in Spirit, wealthy in every way, so that you can be generous in every way, producing with us great praise.

In other words, when you give so that others may eat, it creates a cycle of generosity that includes nourished bodies, fully-formed lives that are robust in Spirit, and wealthy in every way. In other words, there is no dividing line between the needs of body and the needs of spirit. There is no possible distinction between the two.

Some two thousand years after this appeal was written, churches are still taking up collections to feed the hungry and care for the poor. And we stand firmly in the creation of a culture that includes a social safety net that, though it seems politically precarious, still provides a measure of compassion, and honors the desire of people of faith – and people of no faith – who nonetheless care for others as they would want to be cared for themselves. The main difference in the first century, however, is that

there were no church buildings, incorporations, or programs that needed to be maintained. We casually refer to this building as “our church” but that is not the true meaning of the word. The “ecclesia” refers to those who have answered a call. We wouldn’t be here this morning unless there was some sort of inner purpose being expressed. Something calls us here. We can answer that call. We can ignore that call. We can misinterpret that call, and we can even mishandle it. But something calls us. We can identify it for ourselves, but for me it is the call of this Divine Generosity, this spark of life that exists within us and all around us. This energy we call life, that breathes us and beats our hearts, that satisfies us with every good thing, and warms our hearts toward the needs of others.

The church may not be a building, but our current reality is that our church owns a building. It is where we gather, where we meet, where we practice in the school of love, where we try out the teachings of Jesus and hopefully see them come alive. But it can never end there. The church must be at its finest on Monday morning or Wednesday afternoon. The lessons we learn here should be lived out in relationship to our neighbors, whoever they may be, and when we mess that up, we come back here to this place where we express ourselves in all honesty and authenticity, and then we practice some more until we get it right. Then we go down the hill again to carry this wheelbarrow full of divine love to everyone we meet.

This building, this sanctuary, this training ground of course requires support and maintenance and staffing if it is to have any relevance at all in a world that mostly sees an institutional and at times and insular mindset. This Thanksgiving Sunday is a moment every year when we consider the needs of our local church and its mission in the world, and what we can do to support that mission. Recently, most of you received a letter inviting you to consider and perhaps declare what you would be ready, willing, and able to share with the ministry of CCC in the coming year. Some might question the importance of doing this, but I would suggest that it is more important than ever during these uncertain times.

Our treasurer Barbara George works extremely hard each year in collaboration with the Governing Board to determine what it will take to do what we do in the coming year. They also take into account the things we would like to do, the ways our building and property, our programs and practices could be used for the benefit of our community, for the progress of peace and justice and love in this world. The New Testament idea of “ecclesia” has never been descriptive of a social club. It was never meant to be exclusive. It seems it has more to do with a seed that has been planted – in our case planted on the top of Rock Hill. It’s a seed that must be cultivated and watered, lovingly cared for, and brought to a place of harvest. In our current reality, it’s not exactly clear what this all means, but we are on a quest to discern it, and we hope that all of you will discern with us together.

This morning a container is placed on the central altar, and during a time of quiet musical meditation, you are invited – if you wish to do so – to write down your pledge amount and place it there. You can certainly notify Joanne in the office via email if that is more comfortable for you. As you would expect, CCC has never been characterized by the “hard sell.” We simply place the need before you and ask you to find that place of divine generosity within yourself. The amount is not the issue, but the spirit with which it is given most certainly is. Let us celebrate our gifts ... and our giving. And let us consider in a prayerful way our vision for the future of CCC.