

## “Beyond Expectations”

Matthew 14:13-21

October 9<sup>th</sup>, 2016

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Fair Oaks United Methodist Church

Today is the first Sunday of our Stewardship campaign. We will be preparing 2017 church's budget. Please look at the Rainbow poster on the wall. The Stewardship team chose a rainbow image and set a theme, “Responding to God's Promise.” Today's message relates to our theme of God's promise for our personal lives and the church's mission. Rainbow colors are familiar to all of us. It is a biblical metaphor of God's promise in Noah's story. In Genesis 9:12-19, God made a new covenant with Noah after the flood. God says;

This is the sign of the covenant I am making between me and you and everything living around you and everyone living after you. I'm putting my rainbow in the clouds, a sign of the covenant between me and the Earth...I'll remember my covenant between me and you and everything living, that never again will floodwaters destroy all life. When the rainbow appears in the cloud, I'll see it and remember the eternal covenant between God and everything living, every last living creature on Earth. (The Message)

The rainbow reminds us of God's love. This is significantly important to know the nature of God. ***God promised to love us no matter what.*** The core of God's promise in the sign of the rainbow is that God gave himself as a special gift. Therefore we have access to use him. But we can't use him up because God is abundance! So I want to be clear that we understand our stewardship theme. This title is better understood as “we thank God sharing our portions as a response to His abundance and grace.”

After World War2, all religious scholars gathered together for a big religious conference. They talked about each religion's contributions. One question was raised. What is the uniqueness of Christianity compared to other religions? C.S Lewis came forward and said, “That is easy, it is Grace”. C.S Lewis made the right point. Grace is the core of Christian faith. Grace means “God's unconditional and free gift even though we do not deserve it”. Grace is God's expression of His extravagant generosity and love. The Son of God came and died for us. God is loving, caring and compassionate. This morning, I want to invite all of us to find our own reasons to be thankful for God's abundant grace.

Today's Scripture reading is a well-known and popular story in the Gospels. Jesus fed the five thousand people when they had nothing but a few loaves of bread and a couple of miserable cold fish. According to the reading, "Not only all ate and were filled, but there were leftovers of the broken pieces, 12 baskets full." This is a symbolic metaphor of God's abundance. Kathy Glass decorated our altar table beautifully. According to her, the basket on the altar table is a real size of the basket in our Bible story. I am amazed how Jesus fed five thousand people. Here are a couple of interesting background facts about the story. First, the story of feeding the five thousand people is recorded in all four gospels. It means that this story is significantly important not to be forgotten but to be shared generation to generation. Second, we need to consider the hidden numbers of women and children in the story. In Jesus' time, only the male adults were counted. There were five thousands males, so that the total could have been around 15,000 if we included women and children. There were twelve baskets left over even after all people ate and were filled. Why was this story so important to the disciples and early Christian community? We hope not only to understand Jesus' teaching to the disciples but also to us because it is important to our Fair Oaks community, too.

Let's picture again what is happening in this story. The biblical definition of 'Miracle' is 'God's visible sign.' The ultimate goal of miracles in the Bible is not to explain how it happened, but to remind us of what God intended to speak. Jesus got into a sail boat and moved to a more remote, wilderness area. The crowds followed along the shoreline keeping an eye on his boat, and so when Jesus' boat landed, many of the crowd had already arrived. Can you imagine this situation? At least five thousand men were following Jesus because of their spiritual thirst. In both old time and even in our time, people are in hunger for God's presence. As the hour was late, the disciples wanted to send the crowd away so that they could get something to eat, but Jesus said to the disciples, "They need to not go away; you give them something to eat. Now there are over 15,000 people on a field. What they had, 'Five loaves and two fish' was ridiculous! We don't know exactly what Jesus did for people, but the conclusion was beautifully done: "All people ate and were filled even twelve baskets were left." Honestly I don't know how to explain how Jesus magically worked out this problem. What we know from this story is that all people were filled with fullness and satisfaction even overflowing in abundance in both spiritual and physical manner. The key word to understand Jesus' miraculous work in this story is 'abundance.' Henri Nouwen, says, "God's Kingdom is a place of abundance where every generous act overflows its original bounds and becomes part of unbounded grace of God at work in the world."<sup>1</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.azquotes.com/quote/875536> Accessed October 8, 2016

Today's story shows us what God could do for people. The disciples believed that they didn't have 'enough' to feed the over ten thousand people, but Jesus encouraged the disciples not to stay on 'bitter reality' but to see the 'possibility' of what God can do for us. God always exceeds our expectations. God will do more than what we can imagine. In my memory, I have *rarely* heard from the Finance committee say, "Oh, pastor, this year we have received abundant pledges to take care of next year budget so we have no worries." The reality is always that we have tight budgets and challenges. I express my gratitude to our Finance team and the whole church for your faithfulness. I acknowledge and thank God that He has always blessed us with abundant grace to cover our needs and exceed our expectations.

It is the same spiritual principle for our personal lives. In life, we definitely experience challenges of financial problems, broken relationships, troubled hearts and loneliness. We hardly experience 'enough' and 'abundance'. We always worry about many things. For sure, it is important to have 'sense of reality'. Even though we believe in God, we also believe we have to take care of everything in our own ability. Sometimes, our burden is so heavy and hard. In our Scripture reading, the crowd was on a 'deserted place'. This is a great metaphor of our reality, needs, and emptiness. The miracle happened when they offered what they had and put their trust in God. Let's think about the purpose of our Sunday worship. We all come to this place with our thirsty and empty souls seeking spiritual fullness in our hearts. The definition of worship is abundance so that we can use this up to fill our empty souls and hearts. When we acknowledge our empty soul humbly in faith, God will fill in our emptiness. Let us remember God will feed everyone using their limited resources. In the same way, may God bless your hearts and your hands through the same miraculous work in your life. God always will do more beyond our expectations. Let us believe in God and turn to His abundance as we begin our Stewardship journey together! Amen.