

GRACE FOR THE JOURNEY—ABUNDANCE
Luke 7:36-50

Grace For The Journey Message Series
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Some years ago I received a number of e-mails from different people sharing the exact same story. It was one of those e-mail chain letters which ends with the encouragement to send it on to at least four friends; perhaps that is why I received so many. Yet I believe that it also reflects the truth that this story really touched some people's hearts.

The story is about the young husband who is packing his wife's belongings. His task is very solemn; his heart is very heavy. He never dreamed she would die so young. The cancer however came so sure, so quick. At the bottom of the drawer he finds a box, a negligee. Unworn. Still wrapped in paper. *"She was always waiting for a special occasion,"* he says, *"always waiting..."*

This story goes on to emphasize, *"Don't ever save anything for a special occasion. Everyday you are alive is a special occasion."* It reminds us that the word *"someday"* is often our enemy. Someday I can take her on a cruise; someday the children will understand why I worked so hard and was so busy.; someday I will really share my blessings. Yet the somedays often never come.

Luke shares in our Gospel reading about a woman who comes to the house where Jesus is eating. She is so filled with love and thankfulness for Christ's forgiveness that she *"wet his feet with her tears. Then she wiped them with her hair."* Then she proceeded to anoint his feet with expensive ointment.

This woman was definitely one who was not going to wait for *"someday"* to come. She didn't care if she made a scene with her crying and tears. She didn't think about saving this expensive ointment for a better time. No, she overflowed with the abundance of thankfulness and love; she shone forth her thankfulness in freedom and joy.

Yet the Pharisees along with many of the others in attendance missed the beauty and meaning of this action. Rather than celebrating her joy and new life they simply looked on her as a sinner. They were influenced by old rituals and attitudes; they were unable to see the unbelievable grace and forgiveness that Jesus shared.

A favorite family movie when our kids were at home was Amadeus, the Broadway play made into a movie about life of Wolfgang Amadeus Mozart. In this embellished story/drama the devout composer Antonio Salieri has the earnest desire, yet not the ability, to create immortal music of praise.

In fact it infuriates him that God has instead lavished the greatest gift of musical genius ever known on an impish, preadolescent named Mozart. He wonders why God would reward such an undeserving brat rather than a faithful servant like him.

This is the problem some of the people faced who were with Jesus that day; it is in fact the problem large numbers of us still face today. How come God's grace is lavished on certain people who aren't as deserving as I am? Doesn't my good religious life account for any extra blessing? How come these "sinners" are so full of joy and abundant love?

I have heard it explained that in life, as well as in the church, people often have either a theology and attitude of limitations, or a theology and attitude of abundance. With a theology of limitations individuals feel that there is only a limited amount of blessings to go around; there is only a limited amount of power, joy and love in this world.

Therefore with this attitude some may easily feel that if a certain other person is blessed, then there are less blessings for me. If someone else gains prominence and power, then my power and prominence is diminished. If a certain person receives recognition and affirmation then there is less for me. In other words we are all in competition for these limited quantities.

However, a theology and attitude of abundance believes that God has given us and this world an unlimited amount of blessings. In this thinking a person is truly excited and affirming when another individual is successful in something they do.

It is an attitude that affirms people's gifts, celebrates when things go well, wants others to prosper and be successful. They feel this way because they truly believe there is plenty of everything to go around. In fact, a person with this attitude feels even more filled up with joy when they are able to celebrate the good things that are happening in someone else's world.

The Pharisees and others eating with Jesus that day definitely had a theology of limitations. They even saw this lowly woman as a threat to them. They saw Jesus showing this woman grace and forgiveness as something that took away from their prominence, power and religious rules. They seemed to feel that if Jesus showed her love, that then there would be less love for them.

Now unfortunately my friends, this has sometimes been the attitude in certain Christian churches. It is an attitude that has often led to power struggles where one person may feel threatened by someone else who is simply sharing their talents and gifts.

Sometimes certain people in a church have seen reaching out to new people, to new members, as somehow a threat to their position or to the attention they receive. Some actually feel diminished if other people are praised and receive recognition for the good things they have done.

The woman in this story, on the other hand, had a theology and attitude of abundance. She had been touched by the grace and forgiveness of Jesus; she wanted to give it away to others. She knew that this love of Jesus is without limits; she was not going to wait for "*someday*" to show

her love and appreciation. In fact, the more she shone forth; the more she shared her love and blessings the more her life was filled up with even more abundant blessings.

I'm sure we all know people who are always waiting to be blessed; individuals waiting for someone to affirm them; waiting for someone to make them feel good; waiting for someone in the church to minister to them; yet it often never comes. But if it does, the person may feel it is never enough; they often resent others who are happy and doing well in life.

The truth of Christ's Gospel, of course, is that only as we give God's grace and love away will we be truly blessed. Only as we are more concerned about blessing others will we be filled with joy. Only as we are able to celebrate the abundance of God's love for everyone are we able to know that abundance in us. Jesus is truly a fountain that never runs dry.

A good friend of mine, Pastor Walt Kallestad who is senior pastor at Community Church of Joy in Phoenix, says that the steps a church needs to take to become a mission center is to focus on the motto, "*Others first.*" Walt says that only as we do worship, build buildings, offer programs, lift up prayers focusing on others first will we as people, and as a church, be truly blessed.

Here at Messiah I am extremely excited about this theology and attitude of abundance that is literally coming alive here. As our new mission statement opened our arms even more to the community there is a new sense of joy and welcome in this place. As events like our Vacation Bible School includes more than 50% of the children who are not members, there is a sense of joy in the blessing it is to share Messiah's blessings with others.

In the blended and Spirit-filled worship Messiah offers each Sunday there is an abundance of new life in this place as we seek to share the amazing blessings of Christ with people of various backgrounds and worship experiences.

In meeting regularly with Messiah's Stephen Ministers who reach out in lay caring ministry to others; with our Mission Outreach Team who continue to plan outreach meals/events; with Messiah's Youth Team who reached out to the whole area and invited people to the Rachel Kurtz and Agape Weekend; as Messiah's Welcome Team and Worship Volunteers pray each Sunday for their ministry to enhance and help people give glory to Christ, there is a new joy and excitement as our congregation seeks to be in mission for others.

As those on Messiah's Council and Vision Team, as well as many other ministry areas, are growing in their calling as Christ-centered spiritual leaders there is a tremendous amount of affirmation and encouragement for those who are willing to grow and develop their gifts. There is a real desire I believe to help our leaders be successful and do their jobs well. There is a renewed spirit at Messiah of celebrating the joys, possibilities, and potentialities of each person.

This is all happening of course as we seek to give the love and blessings of Christ away. It is that same joy and abundance that comes and fills us up as God's people when we become centered more on giving than on taking. The truth is that when we bless others with the love of Jesus, we are blessed even more with that love in our whole existence.

It is true that I have never met a truly generous, thankful and giving person who is unhappy, angry, a complainer. Rather, the people and churches I know who are generous with their love, time, patience, affirmations, giving—they are fun to be around, have lots of friends, have much joy and hope in all they do. A truly thankful life and church is amazing!

The woman in our Bible story was so filled with the abundance of Jesus' love and forgiveness that she wanted more than anything to share it with others in abundance and gratitude. My friends, let us all learn from her what it is to have a theology and attitude of abundance. As we are so unbelievably blessed by Jesus may we truly pass those blessings on to others.