

Dwelling in Abundance

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Sermon Text: Philippians 4:4-20

I want to begin by telling you about a conversation I had a couple of years ago. Dave and I were away from Dunedin, and we went with our hosts to an Anglican church on a Sunday morning. After the worship service, I had a conversation with the curate. A curate in the Anglican church is a newly ordained minister who serves with a more experienced minister for two years before heading up their own parish.

I asked this curate how things were going for her in her first official minister role, and she started talking quite openly. She said she came from a congregation much different than the one we were visiting that day. She said her home congregation was very alive, with lots of ministries going on, and that this congregation was much smaller, much older, and much less open to new things. She said she thought the primary difference had to do with a “theology of scarcity” versus a “theology of abundance.” She said in her home church, everyone – ministers, parish council members, members – saw God as a God of abundance who at any moment might surprise everyone by doing something new. This God of abundance is generous and supplies needs and resources in big and surprising ways. In her home church, she said, when someone suggested a new idea, everyone was open to watching for how God might provide the resources to meet that new idea.

In the church we were visiting that morning, she said, people seemed to her to be captured by a theology of scarcity. When a new idea was proposed, people would say, “We just don’t have the resources to do that. . . . We never could have those resources. . . . We tried that exact same thing 25 years ago and it didn’t work.” The theology of scarcity, she said, influenced all of congregational life.

I think a uniting theme of Philippians chapter 4 is Paul's theology of abundance. Everything he suggests to the reader depends on having a theology of abundance. Paul doesn't use those words, but throughout his letters he talks about God's abundant provision and God's great generosity. Frankly, it's simply not possible to obey Paul's instructions in chapter 4 without a theology of abundance.

A theology of abundance runs through the entire Bible. "The Lord is my Shepherd, I shall not want" (Psalm 23). Jesus demonstrated and talked about God in a way that fits a theology of abundance. Remember the feeding of the 5000? There were more baskets of fish and bread leftover than at the beginning. Jesus says that anyone who has left mother, sisters, brothers, houses and lands for his sake will receive back a hundredfold.

So let's look at the main themes in chapter 4 and consider the ways obeying them depends on a theology of abundance.

"Rejoice in the Lord always; again I will say, Rejoice. Let your gentleness be known to everyone. The Lord is near."

The ability to rejoice depends on a sense that God is here, God is at work, God will give us enough to meet our needs today. When Paul says, "The Lord is near," is he referring to Jesus' nearness through the Holy Spirit? Or is he referring to Jesus' second coming? I don't think it matters which one it is. Either one has the sense of anticipation of an abundant God.

"Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus."

We cannot pray with thankfulness without a sense of God's abundant provision. We cannot let go of anxiety without a sense that the things we're worried about will be taken care of by God. And Paul's language about God's peace surpassing understanding is the language of abundance.

The person in my life who most exemplifies living faithfully in the light of these words is a friend named Steve. His 66th birthday was this past week, and I want you to see what he posted on Facebook.

“Every day is an opportunity to be attentive, grateful and joyful about God's call. But on my 66th birthday it seems to be a particularly appropriate time – not to 'seize the day' – but rather to surrender to whatever seemingly foolish, tantalizingly creative, or audaciously loving work that God has for me. While I yet have breath, I have purpose, hindered only by my limited vision and small ambitions.”

Look at his words. Do you see the theology of abundance that underlies those words? They are pretty wonderful words for anyone to say on their birthday. What you don't know from those words is that two months ago, Steve was diagnosed with pancreatic cancer that had spread to his liver. He's had 3 rounds of chemotherapy that caused incredible pain and nausea. You may know that pancreatic cancer that has spread to the liver is very, very hard to treat. But he was able to write those words on his birthday.

I'm going to come back to Paul's words about anxiety, prayer and peace later in the sermon, and I'll tell you a little more about Steve then. Now I want to continue walking through the passage, looking at the underlying theme of a theology of abundance.

“Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things. Keep on doing the things that you have learned and received and heard and seen in me, and the God of peace will be with you.”

To spend our time thinking about things that are true, honourable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent and worthy of praise requires that we believe those things are present in our daily lives. Those things are, in fact, signs of God's abundance and presence in daily life.

“I rejoice in the Lord greatly that now at last you have revived your concern for me; indeed, you were concerned for me, but had no opportunity to show it. Not that I am referring to being in need; for I have learned to be content with whatever I have. I know what it is to have little, and I know what it is to have plenty. In any and all circumstances I have learned the secret of being well-fed and of going hungry, of having plenty and of being in need. I can do all things through him who strengthens me. In any case, it was kind of you to share my distress.”

In the last two paragraphs of our passage today, Paul talks about the financial gift the Philippians gave him. He starts off by saying that the gift wasn't necessary because of Paul's need. Paul, you see, was able to be content in any financial circumstances. He's happy when he has abundance financially and when he is poor.

You may wonder how this paragraph relates to a theology of abundance. Paul is talking about contentment when he doesn't have abundant money. This is key to an understanding of the whole passage. Paul is not advocating denial – he doesn't say, “I'm financially rich,” when it's a lie. He is honest about not having an abundance financially, but he is talking about having a different kind of abundance, the awareness that Christ is present in all circumstances.

A theology of abundance doesn't lead us to lie about our circumstances and pretend to do or have something that's not there. A theology of abundance is honest. Here are my circumstances, but here is God's provision for me – provision of strength, in this case. Provision of love, companionship, partnership, and all kinds of other things throughout Philippians.

“You Philippians indeed know that in the early days of the gospel, when I left Macedonia, no church shared with me in the matter of giving and receiving, except you alone. For even when I was in Thessalonica, you sent me help for my needs more than once. Not that I seek the gift, but I seek the profit that accumulates to your account. I have been paid in full and have more than enough; I am fully satisfied, now that I have received from Epaphroditus the

gifts you sent, a fragrant offering, a sacrifice acceptable and pleasing to God. And my God will fully satisfy every need of yours according to his riches in glory in Christ Jesus.”

This paragraph reeks of abundance. The Philippians shared with Paul, Paul is thrilled by their financial generosity because of what it reflects about them. God will fully satisfy every need of theirs and ours according to his riches. Our God is an abundant God.

I come from a Christian tradition in the US that emphasises tithing, giving away 10% of your income. I began tithing when I was 22, and my husband and I have continued to give away at least 10% of our income all of our marriage. Most of our tithe goes to our local congregation, but we also give money to a few other Christian ministries as well. In all the churches I attended in the US, tithing was always held up as a goal, and people were encouraged to figure out what percentage they are currently giving away, and then to increase that percentage bit by bit over several years to get up to 10%.

I know in many church traditions in New Zealand, tithing hasn't been emphasized, and I think that's too bad. Tithing, more than anything else, has helped me grow into a theology of abundance. It has helped me find joy in giving, which helps me understand God's joy in giving to us. A part of me wants to say that tithing requires that we have a theology of abundance, because in order to give away 10% of our income, we have to believe God will provide for and we have to not worry too much about money. But really, tithing is an act of faith that helps us grow into an awareness of God's abundance. It's like a spiral. A theology of abundance helps us be generous, and being generous helps us grow more aware of God as a God who provides abundantly.

I want to go back to what I consider to be the key verses of this passage and think some more about them. Clearly, we can't be generous if we're anxious about money, so there's a direct link between these verses and the verses on the Philippians' generosity.

“Do not worry about anything, but in everything by prayer and supplication with thanksgiving let your requests be made known to God. And the peace of God, which surpasses all understanding, will guard your hearts and your minds in Christ Jesus.

Finally, beloved, whatever is true, whatever is honourable, whatever is just, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is commendable, if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think about these things.”

Maybe you’ve been reading, as I have, about the amazing new brain research that illustrates the significance of how we think about things. We have amazing power to influence our bodies and our actions by how we think about things. That’s why I’m recommending a theology of abundance to you today. When we think of God as being a generous giver of good gifts, we can relax and not be so anxious. We are able to pray more readily about things that worry us.

Last week I was thinking about a problem in my life, and I found myself thinking, “Oh, don’t pray about that, it’s too small. You don’t want to waste God’s energy on that one. You want to save his energy for bigger things.” That’s a theology of scarcity. That presupposes that God has a finite amount of energy for caring for each of us and I have to be careful what I ask for so his energy goes to the really important things.

The recent brain research makes clear that how we think about things influences so much about how we live. Paul was onto that. Let go of anxiety as much as you can, he recommends. Do that by praying about your needs in the context of thankfulness. And focus as much as you can on what is true, honourable, just, pure, pleasing, commendable, excellent and worthy of praise. You will find amazing peace comes to you from God as you do this.

I don’t want to minimize the devastating effects of intense forms of anxiety and anxiety disorders, so if you’re a person who deals with intense anxiety, I don’t want to make it sound like there’s an easy answer. But I do want to say that many of the forms of counselling for anxiety disorders emphasise changing the way we think about things. And that fits exactly with this passage. All of us can move in the direction of less anxiety by working on our thought life.

I want to go back to my friend Steve, who is dealing with pancreatic cancer in a way that I think is consistent with Philippians 4. There's a website for cancer patients called Caring Bridge, where the patients and family members can post news about what's going on, and where anyone can log on and read that material and post comments in response. Steve and his wife Sharol have posted numerous times since his diagnosis two months ago. I want to show you some of the posts.

As I read these posts to you, I want to suggest that you watch for a few things. Watch for honesty. Watch for thankfulness. Watch for Steve's ability to express his belief in a theology of abundance. Watch for how he copes with anxiety.

[Note to reader: for the sermon I had to cut these quotations down. I've left them here in their full length, so you can read them.]

May 7

Yesterday was supposed to be my surgery day. Instead I had a pre-op biopsy because my doctor saw a couple of very small lesions on my liver in an MRI. As it turns out these are also cancer which means that the surgery is now "off the table" as an option. . . .

Honestly, the hardest part of this is not the seeming setback, but rather the delay in starting some sort of treatment that will begin to relieve the increasing symptoms of the jaundice. My energy is very low. I continue to lose weight. And I just plain feel sick most of the time. Thank you for the many prayers and expressions of love. We are overwhelmed, humbled and thankful. We are definitely in the fiery furnace from Daniel 3 but we are not alone. God's presence is very evident.

May 12

Several decades ago our good friend, Ken Irish, wrote a wonderful chorus around Zephaniah 3:17 which I have not sung in a number of years.:

The Lord, your God, is in your midst, a victorious warrior. He will rejoice over you with joy. He will quiet in his love. He will exult over you with shouts of praise.

For some reason, this little chorus has been running through my head for the last several days and it has served as an encouragement to me. . . . Again, I cannot express how

incredibly grateful we have been for the prayers and well wishes of so many friends from the various circles and timelines of our lives. Everyday I feel the privilege of it all.

May 15

May 28 I will begin the first round of aggressive chemotherapy with three different drugs, each with their own potential side effects. . . . What many want to know is the prognosis. Will this work? Can they cure this cancer? These are not my questions. All life on planet earth is terminal, and while we can certainly contribute to our own well-being in amazing ways, none of us is finally in control. One day, my life will be swallowed up by Life. And for today, I am choosing truth, joy, and love wherever and however I can. I am resolute in my desire to learn, to fulfill my calling, and to engage each day with as much joy as I am graciously given or can borrow. I'm apprehensive about the unknown, and I am certainly feeling knocked around. But I am not afraid--at least yet. :-) To paraphrase a Psalm: I lift my eyes to the hills. Is that where my help comes from? No, my help comes from the Lord, who is maker of both heaven and earth--and who holds me in the palm of God's hand.

May 18

It's Sunday morning, and I'm thankful to report that the jaundice is now largely cleared. The last two days I've almost felt my "normal" self again. My energy is at about 85% (rather than 10%), my appetite is back (yesterday I ate three "regular" meals plus snacks), and I was able to attend our granddaughters' dance recital, and a faculty family picnic. :-) Honestly it felt like something of a miracle after feeling so generally awful for a month.

We're both learning new lessons about grace. Grace can never be learned once and for all. It must be explored through each new circumstance. It must be experienced, received and savored. It defies scrutiny but requires reflection. Two nights ago I was awake (I lost pain control for an hour or so) and while I prayed I realized that I had almost lost coherence and just found myself like a small child settling in to the comforting arms of a parent for a long and gentle embrace.

Thank you all for your ongoing prayer and for your kind words of encouragement and love. We read them all and they bring hope and joy, not to mention distraction from some of the daily grind of this disease.

May 23

Thank you for your prayers and for your wonderful expressions of love and friendship. I will never take this sort of thing for granted again.

May 29, post by Steve's wife, Sharol

Steve's day started out with some nausea but by noon, he was able to eat a small lunch. But this afternoon, the nausea really set in and it's been difficult for Steve to get on top of it. He's taking all sorts of meds for various symptoms but we recognize that this is a learning process. It's just hard. . . .

It's been a teary day for me between saying goodbye to a dear friend who is moving and watching Steve suffer. I'm thankful that I know in my head and have experienced before that God is "a very present help in time of trouble." Grateful too that when I don't know how to pray, Jesus is interceding for Steve. And I also know that God hears your prayers. It's time to lean into those truths.

Jun 1

I haven't written since the days that I begin my chemotherapy because I just haven't had the energy to do so. They have been days full of sheer exhaustion, nausea which has come and gone like great waves, and trying to understand many of the other unusual symptoms that my body is experiencing right now. The last I counted, I think I was on seven medications, not counting the chemo itself--most to counteract the various side effects of the treatment.

June 6

I have thought about how often I have advised people to let others carry them in their faith during these times, too. Like the 4 friends in the story about Jesus in Mark 2:1-12. It was not the paralytic's faith to which Jesus responded initially, but the simple faith of the man's friends. I woke up one day this week and realized that I couldn't locate anything like a

genuine "faith" inside me which would provide enough strength to pray or to reflect or to meditate. But then it occurred to me that I didn't need any. God's grace is not about me. So whatever God has for me is going to come from outside anyway. There are so many people who have asked us how they can help--and that morning I realized that they were helping by simply "being faith" for me. They were welcoming God's grace when I couldn't even do that much. And so, I nestled into my pillow, and enjoyed a moment of realization that I was simply being held by joy.

Jun 18

I'm sorry that that it's taken me a while to write again. I was hoping to report about all that we have learned during this second chemo application that has helped us with managing the side effects. And indeed, there are a number of things that we have learned. But over all I would say that this experience has been more difficult than the first. I suppose that it not to be unexpected since the whole point is to give the cancer a one-two (and eventually more) punch.

I do appreciate how "open handed" people have been with their care and support. It really is true that one of the greatest gifts that you can give someone who is hurting is simply "presence"--not advice, not presents, not even tokens of affection (though who doesn't like to be reminded that they are loved!), and not even unbidden help--but just "presence" or the sense that you are remembering and thinking of the other. I often find myself opening an email, reading a note here on CaringBridge, or receiving a card and just deeply and genuinely smiling because it is SO good to be remembered--and usually prayed for.

"The sun comes up; It's a new day dawning. It's time to sing Your song again. Whatever may pass, and whatever lies before me, let me be singing when the evening comes." [Matt Redman]

June 23

Two months ago I could well have imagined spending time on CaringBridge with updates and prayers for friends. But I never would have imagined writing my own cancer journal. In a small flash, the focus of daily attention has changed from the routines and treats of family

life, the preparations for business travel, and the anticipation of holidays on the horizon, to the management of hourly personal medical interventions, the triage of such mundane items such as paying bills, or the curiosity about what my strength might allow in daily interaction and activity, Life is just plain different now.

I like parts of my previous life better. But the choices have changed. Every day has always been an opportunity for attentiveness, gratitude, and living into God's call. But today, on my 66th birthday, I have much less of a desire to "seize the day" and a greater desire to welcome it—with all its twists and turns, surprises and disappointments, moments of delight and discoveries of a yet other areas to which I must pray my 'good-byes' and let the grieving roll.

I have felt reasonably good over the weekend--somewhat greater energy, less nausea, better appetite--and that has provided the opportunity for some very special times with friends with whom we have shared life for well over 4 decades and today with siblings, nephews, children, grandchildren and others in the "clan." Occasionally I slip away for a little rest, but mostly I've been able to enjoy the laughter, the wonder, and the honesty of not avoiding the questions that kids want to ask and that adults often find 'awkward.' There are no taboo subjects around here.

So, today, on my 66th, I'm living into whatever today's version of my "calling" is. I'm going to be as curious, as attentive, as genuinely joyful, and as grateful for every hug and every pill as God gives me the grace to be.

June 26, post by Sharol

Yesterday was the beginning of the third round of chemo. All went well as Steve was cared for by the wonderful oncology nurses. It was fun to be recognized and to recognize these faithful caregivers now that we've been in the infusion center on five different occasions. Steve is currently on the pump for 46 hours as the third drug drips into his system. Nausea continues to be the most difficult side effect though he finds if he holds very still, it is better. When we met with the nurse practitioner, she tweaked both the dosages of his meds and the schedule which potentially will help Steve avoid getting up twice in the night to take

pills. But it's also challenging as Steve sees if and how this new system will work. Steve lost quite a bit of weight during the last couple of weeks so we're also pushing snacks to see if he can keep his weight up.

I often feel like a little girl who keeps asking, "where are we going?" "how long will it take to get there?" and "what will it be like?" I know that allowing these questions to remain unanswered is what trust and faith is all about. And I do sense God's gentle care and reassurance of his presence as I want to see around the corner and cannot. But I still want to know!

In the midst of these questions, the Bible story which keeps coming to mind is from 2 Kings 6 where the King of Aram who is furious with the prophet Elisha for telling the king of Israel the Aramean battle plans, sends his armies with their chariots and horses to surround the city where Elisha lives. The next morning, Elisha's servant gets up and outside sees enemy horses, chariots and armies everywhere and asks in a panic, "what will we do now?"

"Do not be afraid, for there are more with us than there are with them.' Then Elisha prayed: 'O Lord, please open his eyes that he may see.' So the Lord opened the eyes of the servant, and he saw; the mountain was full of horses and chariots of fire all around Elisha.'

I think that the Lord is saying to me, "Open your eyes and see my armies of faithful friends and angels and chariots of fire that are around you and Steve and your families, colleagues and all those dear to you." So that is my prayer--"open my eyes and let me see." It reminds me we are not alone, that the battle is not ours but God's and that basically God asks me and us to "stand still and see the victory of the Lord on our behalf" (2 Chron. 20:17)-one day at a time.

How grateful we continue to be for you and for your prayers and the love which continues to pour over us.

[Posts from Caring Bridge, www.caringbridge.org/visit/journal/stevehayner]

I hope you saw the similarities between Steve and Sharol's words and Paul's perspective in Philippians. Instead of anxiety, whenever you can, turn to prayer. Pray with thankfulness for what is. In fact, give the majority of your attention to the good things around you. Be generous and expect God to be generous with you. When you expect God to be generous and abundant, you see life through that lens, and it makes it so much easier to let go of anxiety. Here's a list that I put on the closing slide of the sermon, so you can see the main ideas of this sermon:

- Watch for God's abundance
- Turn anxiety into prayer
- Practice thankfulness
- Rejoice whenever you can
- Pay attention to the true, the good