

“The Seeds of Abundance”
Sermon by Rev. Katherine Raley
First Christian Church, Colorado Springs, CO
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James 3:13 - 4:3, 7-8a

3:13 Who is wise and understanding among you? Show by your good life that your works are done with gentleness born of wisdom. 14 But if you have bitter envy and selfish ambition in your hearts, do not be boastful and false to the truth. 15 Such wisdom does not come down from above, but is earthly, unspiritual, devilish. 16 For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. 17 But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. 18 And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace. 4:1 Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you? 2 You want something and do not have it; so you commit murder. And you covet something and cannot obtain it; so you engage in disputes and conflicts. You do not have, because you do not ask. 3 You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures. 7 Submit yourselves therefore to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. 8 Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.

There’s a prayer on the front of your bulletin, “Prayer at Sunrise,” by James Weldon Johnson.

O mighty, powerful, dark-dispelling sun,
Now thou art risen, and thy day begun.
How shrink the shrouding mists from thy face,
As up thou spring’st to thy diurnal race!
How darkness chases darkness to the west,
As shades of light on light rise radiant from thy crest!
For thee, great source of strength, emblem of might,
In hours of darkest gloom there is no night.
Thou shinest on though clouds hide thee from sight,
And through each break thou sendest down thy light.

O greater Maker of this Thy great sun,
Give me the strength this one day’s race to run.
Fill me light, fill me with sun-like strength,
Fill me with joy to rob the day its length.
Light from within, light that will outward shine,
Strength to make strong some weaker heart than mine,
Joy to make glad each soul that feels its touch,
Great Father of the sun, I ask this much.

James Weldon Johnson was an African-American man who lived from 1871-1938, and his legacy includes the words of the Black National Anthem “Lift Every Voice and Sing,” the dozens and dozens of poems and songs he wrote, and the progress he achieved for civil rights,

among *many* other things. I first discovered his poetry when my aunt gave me the collection of his poems for my 16th birthday, and it has been a favorite of mine ever since. Every time I read this poem, “Prayer at Sunrise,” I become focused for the day – drawing my light, strength, and joy from God: light for the purpose to shine outward, strength to make strong some weaker heart than mine, and joy to make glad each soul that feels its touch.

This poem reminds us of the incredible *abundance* that we can receive from God. It reminds us that God gives to us something even greater than what the sun gives to the earth – light that will *never* be extinguished; strength and joy that will fill us so completely that they will pour out of us and give strength and joy to others. We are not just reflecting light to others, but acting as our own carriers of God’s great power. Abundant power.

Abundance. It is a word that has continued to pop up for me in the last weeks in the midst of my ministry with you. In devotionals, in listening to Salli Hapner’s talk at the Tennyson Center Dinner, at the Women’s Retreat last weekend during the description of the overflowing blessings that we have gathered, received, and given to others.

Abundance is one of those tricky things. It kind of walks a line: we *want* abundance, but sometimes too much of something is a bad thing. Abundance is an *overflowing*, an *oversupply*. For a society that often seems to fear scarcity, fear poverty, an oversupply and overflowing is greeted with joy. But, if a person tries to keep all that oversupply to oneself, abundance can be a burden rather than a joy. Overflowing *food* that a person cannot use must either be preserved or given away, or it rots. (Like all of those tomatoes in your gardens that you just aren’t quite sure how you’re going to get rid of them all). Overflowing *wealth* can become destructive to a person’s life if it is not used wisely. Overflowing *things* stack up and suffocate that limited space in the rooms and hallways and garages and sheds of your home. Abundance is not meant to be

stockpiled. When we keep it to ourselves, abundance is no longer a joyous blessing, but a destructive burden. So when we talk about abundance, we have to keep in mind that abundance isn't just wealth of something, but wealth that is a blessing through its overflowing to others.

It's because of that need for abundance to overflow to others that *abundance* is something vitally important for a congregation – for a church, like us – to strive for. As church, as followers of Christ, our purpose is to strive to show others the abundant love that God has given to us. We've got to first *believe* in that abundant love, and then we've got to pass it on to others.

So we have to work for abundance. To know what we're working for, we have to picture it in our minds first. I think we forget that step sometimes. That imagining, that dreaming, is something that we should do often, or else we forget to keep moving forward to higher goals. So let's think about it! What would abundance look like in this congregation? What would abundance look like in our activities of this church?

In our singing? Imagine the abundance of overflowing with the spirit and, as we sing a rendition of 'Here I Am, Lord', belting the refrain at the top of our voices, indifferent to the imagined skill level of each individual? What about in our communion? What about in our offering? Would abundance mean the offering plate overflowing, the planned budget of the church all of a sudden looking pitiful compared to the wealth that is given to grow God's love in the world? Would abundance in our Time of Invitation look like not one but many coming forward to profess their belief in Christ? What would it look like in our mission and outreach, in our education classes, in our fellowship, in our prayers? What would abundance look like in our care for each other? *Imagine* abundance in this congregation.

I hope that, when we imagine that abundance, it also makes us *want* it. I hope that just by imagining it, we are filled with the joy and energy that these possibilities would bring. And that joy and energy can be used to actually make that imagined abundance real.

Now we come to the all important question – how? What can we do to make that abundance real?

We plant seeds. Think of a gardener, or a farmer. Just as a farmer prepares the soil, plants the seeds, and faithfully cares for them in preparation for an abundant harvest, so too are there things that *we* can do to prepare to bring in our own abundant harvests, making real those imaginings that we should practice often. The seeds of abundance – they aren't just for farmers, but for planting and growing in our daily lives.

Jesus refers to seeds in relation to the kingdom of God multiple times, and Paul refers to the fruit of the Spirit – practices as seeds that bear fruit. And in the scripture passage today, James also refers to a harvest that must be sown in a certain way to yield a certain kind of abundance.

James is writing to a community that has apparently been torn apart by their competition with each other. Bitter envy and selfish ambition, he says. He is writing to people only concerned about themselves to meet their own desires and needs. He says that they are even willing to kill to get what they want. Kill?? Well goodness gracious what does that have to do with us? No, I am not suggesting that *this* community is the same. But we do have something to learn from this community and from James' response to it. Because there are certainly things that are just ingrained in humanity, and we all share these things in common with the community in James. At 4:1, James asks, "Those conflicts and disputes among you, where do they come from? Do they not come from your cravings that are at war within you?"

Those cravings that are at war within you. I don't know about y'all, but I can definitely relate to that. My own cravings compete with each other for the higher place in my life. The things that I want aren't always compatible. Especially when it comes to how I use the biggest resource a person has – time. When there's only so much time in the day, we all have to choose the priorities. Do we watch a favorite television show, spend time with friends, spend time with our kids or spouses, or go to the gym? And then there's our money – do we spend money on this particular thing, or save it to use on something bigger later? These simple but important things are relatively small, and still can be described as “a war within you.” How much more conflicting are the bigger decisions of life? Those big decisions come up in all of our lives - What job should I take? What school should I go to? What school should *my kids* go to? How can I protect my marriage? You know the cravings that war within you, and the decisions, big or little, that compete with each other.

These cravings are at war within each of us. One of their biggest dangers is that they make us feel like *we don't have enough*. Not enough time to do all the things we want to do. Not enough control to make ourselves do the things we think we *should* do. Not enough knowledge to make the right decision. Not enough money to have everything that we want. Not enough! These cravings competing against each other feel an awful lot like poverty. They feel like scarcity. Not enough of what we want, or even what we *need*. When these things war within us, telling us that we are impoverished, then we lose sight of God's *abundance*.

How do we expel those feelings of poverty, those “not enoughs,” those cravings that war inside of us, and instead plant and grow the seeds of abundance?

James has an answer for that. He says, “You ask and do not receive, because you ask wrongly, in order to spend what you get on your pleasures.” Then, “Submit yourselves therefore

to God. Resist the devil, and he will flee from you. Draw near to God, and he will draw near to you.”

In God, there is no poverty. In vs.6, James emphasizes that God’s grace is “lavishly, generously given to us: God ‘gives all the more grace’; ‘God opposes the proud, but gives grace to the humble’” (Allen & Williamson, *Preaching the Letters Without Dismissing the Law*, 168).

There are many seeds of abundance, and God is at the heart of them all. James lists some of them for us: He says, “¹⁶For where there is envy and selfish ambition, there will also be disorder and wickedness of every kind. ¹⁷But the wisdom from above is first pure, then peaceable, gentle, willing to yield, full of mercy and good fruits, without a trace of partiality or hypocrisy. ¹⁸And a harvest of righteousness is sown in peace for those who make peace.” We can add to those: the fruit of spirit from Galatians: love, joy, peace, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, gentleness and self-control. What else might we add as seeds of abundance? What practices and attitudes lead to abundance? Forgiveness. Prayer. Silence and listening. Service. Giving.

Practicing all of these will certainly lead to abundance. There is another, though, that I particularly want to emphasize that can be applied to all of them. It is *discipline*. “Discipline” is a seed of abundance.

Have you ever had to practice “discipline” in your life to achieve some future goal? I know that you can all say yes to that question – each of practices some sort of discipline all the time. We don’t act on some impulse, or we do something we don’t really feel like doing, because there’s something better for us.

One of the most obvious forms of disciplines in our lives is in our finances. We practice discipline in saving money for particular purposes – in an emergency fund, for some special

thing that we want, like a vacation, or a beautiful dress, or something nice for our homes, for retirement. It takes discipline to save money, some measure of control, and choosing between options.

Discipline isn't *just* about control, it's about doing something or *not* doing something that will make life better later. It's about using our actions to ensure a future abundance.

We can all learn from the lumberjack. ☺ There was a new lumberjack on the job who was eager to prove his worth, and the first day, he cut down 20 trees. The veteran lumberjacks congratulated him and said that he had talent, and soon he might even be able to cut down 35 trees a day, like them. The next day, the new lumberjack started work early and cut his lunch short, wanting to prove himself. At the end of the day, though, he had only cut down 16 trees. The next day he worked even harder, but cut down even fewer trees. He finally asked the other lumberjacks what he was doing wrong. The only answer they gave was, how often did you sharpen your ax? Not at all, was the answer. The new lumberjack hadn't wanted to waste any time.

Discipline is like sharpening your ax. Without it, your harvest will be smaller and smaller. If we don't take the time for prayer, or listening, or kindness, or service.

Discipline is related to our *spiritual* health, and our spiritual abundance. It is with the practice of discipline that we are able to reap an overflowing harvest, because we have practiced all those other seeds of abundance – peacefulness, gentleness, willingness to yield, mercy, love, joy, forbearance, kindness, goodness, faithfulness, self-control. Forgiveness. Prayer. Silence and listening. Service. Giving.

Just like putting money away for a future time, planting a seed of prayer, or forgiveness, will lead to a plentiful harvest. Like taking time to sharpen your ax regularly, discipline is what enables us live the good life now *and* in the future.

The abundance of God's grace is constant, and present to all of us all of the time. That is something that does not need our own discipline. But in order for us to manage those cravings that war within us, to expel that poverty and the "not enoughs" that our envy, ambition, and competing desires create in us, and to reap a harvest of abundance in all that we do, we must, with discipline, plant the seeds of abundance. We must practice prayer, giving, mercy, forgiveness, kindness, self-control, and gentleness – drawing near to God, and living out those dreams of abundance.

Look again at the Prayer at Sunrise on your bulletin. "Oh greater maker of this thy great sun, give me the strength this one day's race to run. Fill me with light, fill me with sun-like strength, fill me with joy to rob the day its length. Light from within, light that will outward shine, strength to make strong some weaker heart than mine. Joy to make glad each soul that feels its touch, great father of the sun, I ask this much." Our abundance, when light, strength, and joy overflow, is truly abundance when it flows out for the purpose of serving another. It comes from God, in service of another. Imagine what abundance would look like here. What seeds are you planting, and who could benefit from our bountiful harvest?