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Eighteenth Sunday after Pentecost

Sermons

from The Church of the Covenant

Life Beyond Death:

Surprised by Abundance

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Ruth 1:1–18

¹ In the days when the judges ruled, there was a famine in the land, and a certain man of Bethlehem in Judah went to live in the country of Moab, he and his wife and two sons. ² The name of the man was Elimelech and the name of his wife Naomi, and the names of his two sons were Mahlon and Chilion; they were Ephrathites from Bethlehem in Judah. They went into the country of Moab and remained there. ³ But Elimelech, the husband of Naomi, died, and she was left with her two sons. ⁴ These took Moabite wives; the name of the one was Orpah and the name of the other Ruth. When they had lived there about ten years, ⁵ both Mahlon and Chilion also died, so that the woman was left without her two sons and her husband. ⁶ Then she started to return with her daughters-in-law from the country of Moab, for she had heard in the country of Moab that the LORD had considered his people and given them food. ⁷ So she set out from the place where she had been living, she and her two daughters-in-law, and they went on their way to go back to the land of Judah. ⁸ But Naomi said to her two daughters-in-law, "Go back each of you to your mother's house. May the LORD deal kindly with you, as you have dealt with the dead and with me." ⁹ The LORD grant that you may find security, each of you in the house of your husband." Then she kissed them, and they wept aloud. ¹⁰ They said to her, "No, we will return with you to your people." ¹¹ But Naomi said, "Turn back, my daughters, why will you go with me? Do I still have sons in my womb that they may become your husbands?" ¹² Turn back, my daughters, go your way, for I am too old to have a husband. Even if I thought there was hope for me, even if I should have a husband tonight and bear sons, ¹³ would you then wait until they were grown? Would you then refrain from marrying? No, my daughters, it has been far more bitter for me than for you, because the hand of the LORD has turned against me." ¹⁴ Then they wept aloud again. Orpah kissed her mother-in-law, but Ruth clung to her. ¹⁵ So she said, "See, your sister-in-law has gone back to her people and to her gods; return after your sister-in-law." ¹⁶ But Ruth said, "Do not press me to leave you or to turn back from following you! Where you go, I will go; Where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God my God. ¹⁷ Where you die, I will die — there will I be buried. May the LORD do thus and so to me, and more as well, if even death parts me from you!" ¹⁸ When Naomi saw that she was determined to go with her, she said no more to her.

John 21:4–12

⁴ Just after daybreak, Jesus stood on the beach; but the disciples did not know that it was Jesus. ⁵ Jesus said to them, "Children, you have no fish, have you?" They answered him, "No." ⁶ He said to them, "Cast the net to the right side of the boat, and you will find some." So they cast it, and now they were not able to haul it in because there were so many fish. ⁷ That disciple whom Jesus loved said to Peter, "It is the Lord!" When Simon Peter heard that it was the Lord, he put on some clothes, for he was naked, and jumped into the sea. ⁸ But the other disciples came in the boat, dragging the net full of fish, for they were not far from the land, only about a hundred yards off. ⁹ When they had gone ashore, they saw a charcoal fire there, with fish on it, and bread. ¹⁰ Jesus said to them, "Bring some of the fish that you have just caught." ¹¹ So Simon Peter went aboard and hauled the net ashore, full of large fish, a hundred fifty-three of them; and though there were so many, the net was not torn. ¹² Jesus said to them, "Come and have breakfast." Now none of the disciples dared to ask him, "Who are you?" because they knew it was the Lord.

Life Beyond Identity: Surprised by Abundance
Ruth 1:1–18, John 21:4–12

Last Sunday I had the pleasure of spending time with the confirmation class, a small group of high school students who will spend this year exploring our religious tradition and reflecting on their faith journeys in preparation for deciding whether they will join the church. We spent time talking about the Bible: how it's organized, what time period it covers, what are the major themes. We compared the Bible to a filing cabinet with two drawers. One drawer contains files representing the books of the Hebrew Bible or Old Testament, books that tell the story of God's relationship with the people of Israel; the other contains files representing the books of the New Testament, books that tell the story of Jesus Christ and the church.¹

Today's texts, one from the Old Testament and one from the New, remind us that perhaps most the significant thing about the Bible is what holds these two sections together: the often-surprising, always-abundant, and eternally-illogical love of God. But notice: love is not where either of these texts begin. They begin with despair. Ruth and Naomi and Jesus's disciples on the fishing boat are all drowning in grief and confusion. Ruth and Naomi are reeling from the loss of the three men who were their source of support, well-being, and security: Naomi's husband and her two sons, one of whom was Ruth's husband. The disciples are back out on the fishing boat after Jesus's execution for treason. They had spent the last three years following Jesus, hearing his teaching, witnessing his miracles, and after his death they didn't know what to do except return to the life they had lived before and the fishing that had been their livelihood.

We can certainly relate to feelings of despair, grief, and confusion.

- the day after we hosted eighty-five people in our church for a symposium on reducing gun violence, fifty-nine people were killed in Las Vegas by a man no one would have ever suspected of stockpiling weapons modified to kill large numbers of people as quickly as possible
- our fellow American citizens in Puerto Rico are in crisis after Hurricane Maria destroyed their already failing infrastructure, and residents of Texas, Louisiana, and Florida are still trying to clean up and adjust to a new normal after Hurricanes Harvey and Irma, even as Hurricane Nate arrives

¹ As presented in the *Confirm Not Conform* curriculum Lesson 5, "A Mad Dash through a Good Book."

- immigrants, refugees, and foreign students and workers face fear and insecurity about whether and how they will be able to live, work, study, and care for their families here in our country
- the racial, ethnic, gender and socioeconomic divisions in our culture become more apparent by the day

For Naomi and for the disciples, the response to loss and the grief and confusion is to put their heads down and try to return to life as it was before. For Naomi, this means returning to Bethlehem, where perhaps she can find a sympathetic relative who will take her in. Like Naomi, the disciples attempt to bury their grief and confusion by returning to the life they knew before Jesus came along and called them away from their families and fishing boats.

It's an understandable reaction, and it's one we've probably all tried. When things – in our lives or in the world around us – get too painful, we throw ourselves into work or school or whatever feels comfortably familiar. But in both of these stories, something happens to disrupt that attempt to return to what was familiar and comfortable in the past as a way of escaping what is painful and disorienting in the present. What happens is an experience of surprising, illogical, and abundant love.

As Naomi prepares to return to Bethlehem, she bids her daughters-in-law, Orpah and Ruth, farewell. They are devastated; after all, when they married her sons they left their own families, so Naomi is now the only family they have left. Orpah is convinced to let Naomi go, but Ruth will not be dissuaded: “where you go, I will go, where you lodge, I will lodge; your people shall be my people, and your God shall be my God,” she says. The rest of this story is a testament to how Ruth's extravagant display of loyalty and commitment leads to an outcome of abundance and joy that neither of them could ever have anticipated. Spoiler alert: the story ends with Naomi cradling Ruth's newborn son, who will be the grandfather of Israel's greatest king, David, and an ancestor of Joseph, the father of Jesus.

For the disciples, the experience of abundance comes when a man on the beach – who is too far away for them to recognize – suggests that if they've caught no fish yet, they should move their nets to the other side of the boat. These guys were professional fishermen, and they weren't fishing with poles that could easily be pulled up and plopped down on the other side of the boat. They were using nets, held under water by weights. It would take all of them to pull up the

nets and maneuver them to the other side. And the other side was probably no more than a couple of feet away from where they had the nets to begin with, so the suggestion was downright silly. Maybe it was the time they had spent with Jesus that compelled them to listen to a crazy idea from a stranger, but for whatever reason, they did all that work and moved the net and almost immediately caught so many fish that they could barely haul in the catch. That's when they knew the man on the beach was Jesus.

When I was in seminary, every Friday in chapel we celebrated communion by intinction, which meant that we walked forward to take a piece of bread from a common loaf and then dipped it into a cup of juice. One Friday, I walked up to the professor who held the bread, but instead of letting me take a piece just big enough to dip in the cup without getting my fingers in the juice but small enough to politely put in my mouth all at once, this professor tore a huge chunk of bread from the loaf and gave it to me. Of course, I wasn't going to refuse it, but I had no idea what to do with it. I dipped it in the cup and bit off as big a bite as I could, but that still left a good-sized chunk in my hand. I went back to my seat holding it and glanced around. That's when I saw that all the people around me were wrestling with the same dilemma. Some were trying to surreptitiously eat the rest of their bread, others were just nervously holding it, and I saw one person casually drop it on the floor as if by accident. After everyone had received the elements, the professor spoke. "The bread and juice you have just received is a sign of God's grace, which is always, always, more than we expect or deserve and more than we know what to do with."

The only time the gospel of John uses the word "grace" is in chapter one: "And the Word became flesh and lived among us, and we have seen his glory, the glory as of a father's only son, full of grace and truth...from his fullness we have all received grace upon grace." The rest of the gospel contains story after story that illustrate this declaration of God's abundant love and grace revealed in Jesus:

- Jesus turning water into 180 gallons of really fine wine when the alcohol runs out at a wedding feast;
- Jesus feeding thousands of men, women and children with just a few loaves and fishes...and having twelve baskets of leftovers;
- Jesus abruptly reversing lifelong maladies for those who were blind or lame or staggering under the weight of mental illness.

It should be no surprise that John's gospel ends with yet another act of illogical, abundance: the disciples' nets overflowing with fish when moments before they could not catch a single one. Jesus does not give abundance just to show off his miraculous abilities. The abundant life he offers us is not for us to keep for ourselves. When the disciples come to shore after that miraculous catch, Jesus has a fire going so that they can share a meal, and he invites the disciples to provide the main dish out of their abundance. "Bring some of the fish you've just caught," Jesus says. God's surprising, illogical, and abundant love is not given to us just so we can know how much God loves and cares *for us*. God gives to us – love, talents, and skills – so that we can experience the satisfaction of sharing the best of ourselves with God's world. Because when we share what God has given us, we experience the unparalleled freedom and joy of *life beyond scarcity*.

In our culture, messages of scarcity are relentless, and –although it may seem counter-intuitive – the more resources we have, the more likely we are to believe these messages that tell us there is only so much to go around, that if someone wins, someone else has to lose. Walter Brueggemann writes, "An ideology of scarcity says...there's not enough, so hold onto what you have. In fact, don't just hold onto it, hoard it. Put aside more than you need, so that if you do need it, it will be there, even if others must do without."²

Twenty-five years ago, St. Paul's Episcopal Church, up the hill in Cleveland Heights, faced a problem that first seemed like a problem of scarcity. After school each day, students from the nearby middle school would cut through the church parking lot after school. Sometimes they'd even come inside the church building where they would help themselves to a cup of coffee, get into fights in the hallways, or find a dark corner to make out in. The church leaders and staff were, understandably, concerned. They didn't have the resources to keep track of the kids who came in and they didn't want to risk damage to their building or the liability of having unsupervised kids on their property. So they made the decision to lock their doors. At first, it worked. The kids didn't come in any more – they couldn't! But for the leaders of the church who had made this decision, something just didn't feel right about it. Finally, after conversation and discernment, they decided to unlock their doors and provide programming for kids who needed a safe place to go after school. That was the beginning of Open

² Walter Brueggemann, "Enough is Enough," *The Other Side*, November-December 2001, Vol. 37, No. 5.

Doors Academy, which, in the last twenty-five years, has grown into one of the largest and most effective after-school programs in Cleveland, whose modest goal is to break the cycle of intergenerational poverty all because a church made a conscious decision to move beyond an ideology of scarcity to a theology of abundance.

The history of the Church of the Covenant shows that we are also a community that understands the importance and challenge of this shift from an ideology of scarcity to a theology of abundance. For decades, we have found ways to open our doors and our building and our hearts and our wallets to share our resources with those who can benefit from them, regardless of whether they share our faith or intend to become a part of our community.

This week in the mail, you'll receive a letter about our annual giving campaign. The letter contains a list of many ways the church has lived our vision in the last few months. And I assure you, the list is by no means exhaustive. Now those of us who wrote this letter know that the majority of you will probably skim it and then – hopefully – fill out the commitment card. Knowing how precious your time is, I'm going to ask you to do more than that, to set aside ten minutes to really sit with the data and what it represents, and to do that before you decide on your financial commitment. Because each number in that list of data represents a human being – a beloved child of God – who, because of the abundant resources of this family of faith and our generosity in sharing these resources, has had the opportunity

- to learn from a tutor,
- to find respite during a concert,
- to gather strength to stay sober,
- to receive enough food to get through the week.

Thanks to our generosity and the generosity of those who have gone before us, we continue to live beyond scarcity and toward the abundant life God offers each of us.

Given all the uncertainties in our lives and in our world, it is understandable that many of us feel a sense of anxiety and despair, of hopelessness and helplessness. But we are God's people. We walk in the footsteps of Ruth, who risked everything to stay with her mother-in-law Naomi and move to a unknown land. We follow the example of the disciples, who were willing to heed the advice of a stranger to try something that defied reason. Like these and

countless other biblical figures, God calls us to risk, to step out in the unknown, to willingly and joyfully embrace a theology of abundance that rejects an ideology of scarcity.

This calling is a reminder that we are neither helpless or hopeless, we are the recipients of God's abundant love and grace. No matter what we have, it is enough to share, and it is the very act of sharing itself that reveals to us the presence and grace of God who gives us more love than we can handle, more than we deserve, more than we know what to do with, and then calls us to find ways to give it away.

Amen.