

## **The Call to Abundant Life: Taking a Risk of Faith**

A Sermon Preached for Calvary Baptist Church

*John 6:1-15*

Sunday, July 8

By Mary Alice Birdwhistell

Parker Palmer tells a great story about a flight he took many years ago from Chicago to Denver. The plane pulled away from the gate but stayed taxied for a long time – long enough that the passengers knew something wasn't right. Their hearts sank when they finally heard the engines power down and the pilot's voice come over the intercom.

The pilot said, "I have some bad news, folks. There's a storm in the west, exactly where we are headed, and the Denver airport is shut down. Unfortunately, there are no alternatives for us, so we're going to have to stay here on the airplane for at least a few hours. That's the bad news.

The really bad news is that we don't have any food on board." (This story is from the days when there was real food on airplanes – not just bags of peanuts or pretzels, and the passengers were all expecting a full meal during their cross-country flight. I have no idea why they wouldn't let them off the plane to eat at the airport – but evidently, that wasn't possible).

Everyone groaned. Some passengers became angry. But then, Palmer said, one of the flight attendants stood up in the aisle and took the mic. She said, "We're really sorry here, folks. We didn't plan it this way, and we can't do anything about it. We know that for some of you this is a big deal. You're hungry and were expecting lunch. Some of you have a medical condition and really need food. And some of you have young children. So I have an idea.

"We have a couple of empty bread baskets up here," she said, "and we're going to pass them around. Everybody put something in the basket. I know some of you have brought little snacks along, just in case – peanut butter crackers, candy bars. Some of you have Roloids, Life Savers, chewing gum. And if you don't happen to have anything edible, you have a business card or a picture of your kids or a bookmark. The thing is, I hope everybody puts something in the basket. And then we'll reverse the process. We'll pick the baskets up at the back of the plane and pass them around again and everybody can take out what he or she needs."

Palmer said, "What happened next was amazing. First, the complaining and griping stopped. People started to root around in their pockets and handbags and briefcases. Some stood up and retrieved luggage from the overhead racks and got out boxes of candy, salami, Italian sausage, cheese, crackers, even a bottle of wine [it was in the day you could actually take lots of things with you on a plane]. [Soon] people were laughing and talking. The flight attendant had transformed a group of anxious people focused on their need, deprivation, and scarcity into a gracious community, sharing and in the process, creating an abundance of sorts."<sup>1</sup>

The flight eventually took off and landed, and as he stepped off the plane, Palmer found the flight attendant and said, "You know there's a story in the Bible about what you did [today]" She said, "I know that story. That's why I did it."

You could call it a modern-day- rendition of today's Scripture reading from John chapter 6. Here in John's gospel, Jesus is up on a mountain with the disciples when he sees a large crowd of people coming toward

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.fourthchurch.org/sermons/2011/100211.html>

them. The Jewish Passover is near, and he says to Phillip, “Where are we going to buy bread for all of these people to eat?” – although Jesus already knows exactly what he is going to do.

Philip looks at the crowd and at what they don’t have – they don’t have enough money to buy bread for 5000 people. He says, it would take 6 month’s wages to buy enough bread just for everyone to have a bite.

But another disciple, Andrew, looks at what they do have. He says, “Look, here is a boy with five barley loaves and two fish.” I wonder what we could do with that?

And so Jesus takes the little that they do have - the barley loaves and fish - blesses it, and begins to pass it around. Then, he invites everyone to sit down in the grass and to eat – and he tells everyone to have as much as they want. Soon, he asks the disciples to “gather up the fragments” – and low and behold, there are actually twelve baskets of food leftover.

Some people, even some of my respected colleagues and favorite writers, have tried to rationalize this story, just trying to make sense of it in some way. And so they propose that out of the 5,000 people sitting in the grass, surely some of them had food with them. And maybe after hearing from Jesus, they started feeling compelled to open up their bags and pockets and to share whatever food they had with them, so that all 5000 people could eat. Maybe it was like a big potluck on the grass that day, with more than enough food to go around. Maybe this is a story of kindness and generosity and love of neighbor.

I don’t know about you, but I tend to think that this story is much bigger than that – even though a story of 5000 people sharing and practicing generosity would be a beautiful thing, much like the airplane story shared by Parker Palmer. But I actually don’t think that is what this story is about.

Because the reality is that this is the only miracle story found in all four of our gospels. Two of the gospels actually tell it twice, because once just doesn’t feel like enough for a story this big. It’s a story that has captivated people’s minds, hearts, and souls from the moment it happened – so much so that all four gospel writers thought to include it in their narratives, which means you and I ought to pay careful attention.

And because of that, I can’t help but to think and to hope and to imagine that this story is about so much more than people being nice and sharing. I can’t help but to think and to hope and to imagine that this is a story about a God who does big and abundant and even miraculous things that you and I cannot even begin to do on our own.

After all, as Pastor Nadia Bolz-Weber says, “As crazy as it is – I believe in miracles – not because I think I’m supposed to but because I need to. I need to believe that God does what we cannot do. Because if God just acted in ways we could – we could all just be our own Gods. And if history tells us anything,...it’s that we make terrible gods.”

You see, if we’re not careful, you and I can convince ourselves, like Nadia says, that we can provide for our own needs. That we can solve the world’s problems. That we can make a way. That we can do it. If only we work long enough. Dream big enough. Fight hard enough. Stay up long enough. Study hard enough. Give of our all enough.

Nadia goes on to say, “I wonder if, like the disciples, we too make the mistake of not always realizing how different God is from us and what a good thing that is. That we have a God who can actually feed so many on so little. A God who created the universe out of nothing, that can put flesh on dry bones nothing, that can put life in a dry womb of nothing. NOTHING is God’s favorite material to work with,” she says. “[And so,] perhaps

God looks upon that which we dismiss as “nothing” “Insignificant” “worthless” and says “Ha! Now *that* I can do something with.”<sup>2</sup>

For the past several weeks, we have been talking about living the abundant life here at Calvary. Fulling living into God’s abundance means that there is strength even when we are at our weakest. There is grace, even when we are at our lowest. There is hope even as we are in despair. There is light even in the darkness. There is new life, even when all the signs around us point to death. Through Christ, there is ALWAYS more than enough. Perhaps believing in miracles, like today’s text, forces us to acknowledge the ways that we can’t and that only God can.

However, you and I have a job in all of this, too. Now, it’s not as clear in John’s reading, but in Matthew, Mark, and in Luke, Jesus actually gives the baskets to the disciples and asks them to pass the baskets of food out to the rest of the people. And I can’t help but wonder how much trust this act would have taken them.

I can imagine the disciples saying to Jesus, “Look – there’s not enough food! What in the world are you asking us to do? We’re going to make fools of ourselves. The people are going to get angry with us. Or laugh at us. Or heckle us for thinking a few baskets of fish and bread can even begin to feed 5000 people.”

But for some reason, they do it anyway. You see, it’s God’s job to do the big, miraculous work we could never do on our own. But God invites us to have a part in that work, too. Our job is to trust. To take a leap of faith.

Like the time Jesus called Peter to step out of the boat, even when he was afraid he would sink. Or when he called the disciples to cast out their nets again, even though they had been fishing all night long, and had caught nothing.

Or when God called the Widow of Zarahath to make a loaf of bread for Elijah, even when she barely had enough flour and oil to feed herself and her son. Or like today’s text, when Jesus calls the disciples to pass around the baskets, even when it seemed like there was no way that there would be enough food to go around.

Friends, in what way is God inviting you to take the next, brave step forward in order for God to do a miracle? In what ways are you being asked, or nudged, or challenged to partner with God in God’s abundant work in the world?

This summer, Waco ISD has been working with local churches and Prosper Waco to prepare to meet a huge need in our community this fall. Their goal is to have book clubs for 100% of all 3<sup>rd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> graders at the three campuses with greatest need (Alta Vista, Brook Avenue, and J.H. Hines) and 50% of four of our other campuses (Dean Highland, West Ave., Bells Hill, and Crestview). This will require 250 new mentors from local churches, while also keeping the 145 mentors from the previous year. Their even bigger goal is to have book clubs for 100% of 2<sup>nd</sup>-5<sup>th</sup> graders in 15 WISD schools, which would mean 1600 mentors, reading with almost 4800 children each week in our community.

We’ve had about 20 mentors from Calvary engaged in reading clubs at West Avenue over the past year. I wonder if we could have 40 or even 50 mentors from Calvary in the coming year. I believe that only God can do it – but it requires us to step out in faith.

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<sup>2</sup> <http://www.patheos.com/blogs/nadiabolzweber/2015/07/sermon-on-the-feeding-of-the-5000-preached-for-pastors-musicians-and-church-leaders/>

In April, through the leadership of our finance and personnel teams here at Calvary, our Coordinating Council proposed a giving campaign called Journey On that would challenge us to pay off the remainder of our renovation costs in order to journey on in God-sized ways in the days ahead, including beginning our search for an associate pastor. At the beginning of April, we needed \$79,000 to pay off these remaining costs. We are thrilled that in only three months' time, we have already received \$57,795, which is over 70% of our goal. (Some of you have asked, and this is not money that has been pledged – this is money that has actually been received). We only have a little over \$21,000 left to pay off. However, most of this will need to come from weekly, monthly, and bi-monthly gifts since our one-time gifts have already been received. I believe that only God can do this – only God who have gotten us to this point - but it requires all of us to step out in faith.

And of course, many of us have been talking about our anger and unrest at the injustices happening along our borders, just hours away from us, particularly to children who have been separated from their families. I am communicating regularly with clergy and other leaders here in Waco and in our broader CBF networks to see how Calvary can be part of seeking justice and mercy and extending hospitality to our immigrant neighbors. I will be meeting with someone from the Waco Immigration Alliance tomorrow and will be meeting with local clergy, social workers, and community leaders next week at the Garland School of Social Work to talk about the next steps we can take together. The challenge before us is great, and I truly believe that only God can show up in the big and abundant and miraculous ways that are needed – but it requires all of us to step out in faith.

Friends, in what way is God inviting Calvary to take the next, brave step forward in order for God to do a miracle? In what ways are we being asked, or nudged, or challenged to partner with God in God's abundant work in the world?

I came across a quote this week in a sermon by Gary Hall when he was serving as the Dean of the Washington National Cathedral. He was preaching at the installation service for Amy Butler at the Riverside Church of New York City, and he said the following: "A church, even a great historic church, will be a credible leader in peace and justice only as far as it can learn to bask in the grace and abundance of God's compassionate, transforming love."

I fully believe that God wants to do big, bold, miraculous, abundant work among us here at Calvary. You can feel it in the air. You can sense that the Holy Spirit is up to big and beautiful things in this place. But that work doesn't begin with our working harder. It doesn't begin with our plans – as thoughtful and well-intentioned as they may be. It doesn't happen by hiring more staff. Building more committees. Growing our church. Raising more money. Adding more programming. Or you fill in the blank.

I believe with every fiber of my being that the most important work God can do begins right here in this space. It happens when you and I come to worship the God who does big and abundant and even miraculous things that we cannot even begin to do on our own. Because a church, even a great church, will only be a credible leader in peace and justice and mission and ministry in this world...only as far as it can learn to bask in the grace and abundance of God's compassionate, transforming love. May it be so with us, Calvary.