

“Thirsting for Abundance”

Exodus 17:1-7

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One of the things I most look forward to when the weather warms up is that people come out of their houses and into the streets! It makes it much easier to people watch when we're all mingling outdoors together.

The best people watching this week happened while I was walking in downtown East Lansing. I spied a heartwarming goodbye scene in front of the Flyer bus that goes to the Detroit airport. Three people, two of whom looked like brothers and the third who looked like a spouse, posed for a selfie. The three of them had their arms around each other's necks, squeezed tight together, big grins on their faces as they cheesed for the camera. Then the threesome morphed into a giant hug, taking turns and then hugging each other for a second time before reluctantly parting as the couple got on the bus and the brother returned to his car.

It was all over in 45 seconds, but the emotions that were evident in that moment have stayed with me. There were a lot of things that conspired to make that goodbye scene happen. A family visit that left them overflowing with feelings of connection and love and gratitude. Good health - not just their own allowing them to travel or play host but also a communal health level that made this trip feel lower risk. Resources to buy bus tickets and plane tickets - and reliable access to fuel that allows public and private transportation to happen on a large scale. The couple had a life that enabled them to step away for a time - jobs that would be waiting for them when they return and perhaps a dog sitter caring for their golden retriever - they seemed like golden retriever people. The brother had a home that was able to accommodate his family for however

long, space to make them comfortable, food to feed them, blankets to warm them when the temperatures dipped low at night.

If any one of these elements had been removed - a home to host in, steady employment, access to transportation, good health, healthy relationships - the scene might have looked very different, or it might not have happened at all. And yet, when they pressed close together smiling at the camera, when they took turns embracing each other - all you could see was the overwhelming love they shared. This scene was a slice of what living a life of abundance looks like.

When I talk about abundance, I am talking about the elements that are necessary to allow us to give and receive love freely with wild abandon. To live a life of abundance is one in which we can orient our whole selves toward love - by having the time to spend with loved ones, by having access to resources in a way that clears the way for us to focus on love, by having a life that enables us to nurture the love in our lives, to seek out more love when it feels depleted, and to freely offer it to those around us, be they family or friends or neighbors or strangers you are connected to through service or advocacy of some kind.

We are constantly sold messages of a different kind of abundance. We are told that abundance means beauty and therefore, you need to spend time cultivating your physical beauty through a wide array of products and diets. We are told that abundance means wealth, and that no matter what your income, wealth is defined as a financial bracket somewhere above you. Therefore you need to strive for the highest paying job or strive to generate more income at any cost. We are told that abundance means having the most stuff. Therefore you need to buy the newest toys, the biggest tv, the biggest house, the most clothes, the most fashionable clothes, the flashiest cars, and, ironically, the tiniest gadgets that make the biggest splash.

We are told that abundance is tied with capitalism and we find ourselves caught in these cycles of consuming and collecting STUFF and then rejecting it when we feel that it is we who have been consumed BY our stuff, and then we need new stuff - eco friendly stuff and sustainable stuff and stuff in more classic colors that will surely outlast the stuff that came before it - new stuff to replace the stuff we gave away and on and on and on. We find ourselves thirsting for abundance but unsure of how to define abundance or what it is we are thirsting for.

When the Israelites were in the wilderness, the Israelites were not experiencing a life of abundance. They were missing something that was essential to their existence - there was nothing to drink. They were parched and thirsting for water. Without something to drink, the Israelites are not able to focus on any other part of their lives in that moment - their thirst consumed them. They didn't care that they had escaped slavery. They didn't care about liberation or rebuilding their community and their culture. They didn't care that they were heading toward the land of milk and honey - they were thirsty now. They needed water now.

Moses hears their complaints and he is salty in response. He questions their loyalty to God, gets irritated with their complaints, and says, "What am I ever going to do with these people?!" God tells Moses to gather the elders, take his staff, and strike a rock where water will come flowing out. God had more patience than Moses did.

This story is a reminder that the essential resources are important because without them, we are cut off from the abundance of life. Not having access to things like clean drinking water prevents us from living fully. When we talk about advocating for access to clean water or ensuring that communities like Flint and Benton Harbor have safe water supplies or when we call out cutting off people's access to water for the sake of a profit over human life, this is because these basic resources are a right to life, and without them, we are cut off from a life of

abundance - a life where we might be free to spend our time and energy cultivating joy and peace and hope and love instead of crying out for a drink of water. The Israelites remind us that when you do not have what you need to survive, you are cut off from the abundance of thriving.

Water is one example but there are other things that when they go missing cut us off from abundance: public health crises leave us thirsting for abundance, unreliable transportation both private and mass transit leave us thirsting for abundance, a health system that does not provide the care we need leaves us thirsting for abundance, wage inequity leaves us thirsting for abundance, a culture that shames and stigmatizes mental health and leaves people struggling in silence has us thirsting for abundance.

Abundance looks like being able to live out our faith values - personally and communally. We strive for systemic change to support all people living a life of abundance, not just some people. We do things like care for the environment so that one day our great grandchildren might be able to live in abundance in the natural world around them. We commit to anti-racism so that prejudice and oppression does not prevent us from loving one another abundantly, so that daily experiences of oppression do not prevent folks from experiencing abundance in every sphere of their lives. We work tirelessly for peace because we know that guns and tanks and bombs cut people off from a life of abundance.

Thirsting for abundance is about thirsting for the things that make life worth living. When we are thirsting, when we are parched, when we are in the wilderness, we cry out to God to bring forth something that will satisfy our soul and quench our thirst.

I love that God tells Moses to bring the elders with him when he makes the water come out of the rock. He needs witnesses to this miracle, but it is only the elders that are invited to

come. There is something particular about this group of people that God was trying to show them and remind them.

The presence of the elders reminds me of the privilege of many conversations I have had with elders over the years in their last season of their life, often at their bedside in the last weeks and days of their lives. One of the joys of being a pastor is being invited to time-travel with someone into the history of their life, of getting to ask questions about important memories and listening to what has been most meaningful for them. I have done this in different churches I have served with people from all different walks of life and a wide variety of life experiences. I have heard stories full of pain, heartache, and unbearable loss. I have listened to stories that were full of laughter and joy and pride.

Across all the different people I have sat with and listened to there is a constant theme - love. People define their lives by the love they received and the love they were able to give. The stories of pain and unbearable loss came from feeling cut off from love or losing a loved one. The stories of joy and pride were about relationships tended to and love that was nurtured across generations. When people talk about the places they have traveled around the world, they always tell me the people they traveled with. When people talk about the different eras they have lived through, they always tell me about the people that were a part of each era. It's the people. When people talk about their accomplishments, the things they are proud of, they talk about the people they impacted through their work or their volunteer lives - the communities they served and individuals who left an impression on them.

Love is the secret to an abundant life. Making sure that every living being has access to the resources they need to thrive means making sure they have a life where they can focus on

love - focus on nurturing their children and caring for their neighbors and listening to their elders and be the recipient of love in return. Love is the secret.

God made us a people of love and is constantly pointing us back toward love. It's the first Sunday of Lent, which means there is still time to think about what you might cultivate in this wilderness season leading us to Easter. How might you nurture abundance in your life? How might you reorient yourself toward love? I know one person who is writing a letter every day to someone in their life to let them know how much they mean to them. If it was me I might amend that to a text message or an email. Someone else might advocate to their elected official on one issue each day, an issue that prevents others from living a life of abundance. Someone else might reach out to a young working family and offer to drop off supper once a week, knowing that they are using their resource of spare time and easy access to food to allow that family extra time at the dinner table together. Someone else might spend this season examining what the things are that keep them separate from loving deeper or from cultivating different kind of love in their life. The possibilities are endless. Like the Israelites, we are thirsting. We are thirsting for an abundant life. It's not an abundance that we can buy, but it is an abundant, sacred love that we can embody in all that we do. May it be so. Amen.