

“Abundant Provision”
John 6: 1-15

First Presbyterian Church
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Derek McCollum

I listened to a fascinating story the other day on my favorite podcast—This American Life. The story centered mostly on a man named Daniel Kish. Daniel Kish is in his late 40’s and he’s been blind since he was just over one. In fact, he’s not only blind, he actually has no eyes at all. Because of a cancer found in his eyes when he was a baby, doctors had to remove his eyes. What makes Daniel noteworthy is that he can see.

When he was a young child, Daniel began making a clicking sound with his tongue and listening to the way that that sound bounced off of the things around him. He would click listen very closely to how that sound changed depending on his environment. It’s called echolocation. It’s the way that bats get around. It’s much like sonar, which both submarines and dolphins use. Daniel has become so good at echolocation that he can walk around the city with no cane. He can ride a bike. He climbs enormous trees. He’s actually a Certified Orientation and Mobility Specialist—that means he trains blind people how to move around their environments. He’s the first blind person to ever be given that designation. He’s literally the blind leading the blind.

And here’s what is to me so fascinating about this story (as if a man using echolocation to ride a bike isn’t fascinating enough!): Neurologists have discovered that the part of the brain that activates when visual images are seen, when light enters someone’s eyes and then send that data to the brain, this part of the brain is also active when someone like Daniel is using echolocation. So the data that comes into his brain via his ears actually begins to create an image in his mind much like yours or mine. Through echolocation, his brain can create an image of what is around him. In a very real way, he is seeing. Amazing, isn’t it?

The story also reminded me of the way in which most of us do the same thing in other areas of our lives. We build images in our heads of what we think things are like, or at least what they *will be* like. Take for instance two people meeting, dating

and getting married. Well, most of us begin to build a picture in our heads of what our spouse is going to be like very early on in life. That picture changes over time based on the data that we take in, but it continues to build. By the time a couple decides to get married, those pictures in each of their brains can become a very dangerous element in their marriages. Because more often than not, the image of their spouse does not look exactly like their actual spouse. The beautiful painting of “husband” that has lived in this woman’s head for years may only slightly resemble “Ted,” her actual husband. Same goes for the man. When I counsel engaged couples, I always give them this warning: *don’t fall in love with the image. It will only disappoint. Because it’s not real. Fall in love with the person and you’ll find out that he or she is so much better than your expectations.*

We just read a story where Jesus came and did something amazing. But it ended weird. It ended weird because the image of who Jesus was supposed to be did not match up to the reality of who Jesus is.

You may have come this morning wondering who Jesus is. Maybe you don’t care who he is. Maybe you’re frustrated by who you think he is. Let me invite you to be challenged by the real Jesus—not the image we have created of him. Because he’s much more fascinating than Daniel Kish.

You may have come feeling like you know Jesus really well and you have a long list of things you’d like him to do for you. A financial change. A relational change. You hate your job. You hate your father. You hate your wife. And you think Jesus is the one who will make all those problems go away and make you happy. Let me invite you also to be challenged by the real Jesus. To see Him on display here. Because He’s so much more rewarding than the image you may have built of him.

As John opens the story for us, Jesus is around the Sea of Galilee and a big crowd is following him. And we’re immediately told two reasons why there is a big crowd following him. First, there are a lot of people in town because it’s Passover. People have come from all over Israel and outside Israel to celebrate Passover together. Passover was a national holiday and a big feast. Kind of like Mardi Gras and Fourth of July rolled into one. You’ve seen what happens during Mardi Gras and during Fourth of July—lots of people get together in one place. So there are more people here than normal. And John tells us they are following Jesus because

they have seen the stuff that he's done and they want to see more. They saw him healing the sick and they wanted to see more. And John tells us there are about 5,000 men gathered. We are probably to assume that there are women and children there as well, so we're talking about at least 10,000 and maybe up to 20,000 or so people.

Now... if you want to know what might get an event planner fired faster than anything else, plan a gathering of 10-20 thousand people and don't have any food around. That's a sure fire way to get fired! But that's exactly what happens here. Thousands of people gathered together, there unexpectedly, and getting hungry. And Jesus looks up and sees them and says to Phillip, "where will we buy bread for these people?"

Then Phillip begins to explain the problem to Jesus... "Well, Jesus, not only are we in the middle of nowhere, but do you know how much it would take to feed these folks? (Phillip is the numbers guy of the group!). It would cost 200 denarii to get that much food and even then, everyone would only get a little.

You may have a footnote in your Bible that says how much a denarii was—it was about a day's wages. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, the average full-time worker in America makes about \$796 per week or about \$160 a day. So a Denarii in today's economy is worth about \$160. 200 of those is \$32,000. Which is right in line with what Phillip is saying. For 10,000 people, that's about three bucks per person, and that's if it's more like 10 thousand—much less if it's 20 thousand. Three bucks will barely get you a happy meal, and that's not much food. What Phillip is saying is even with a LOT of money, we would have a LITTLE bit of food.

And then Andrew chimes in... "Well... there's this boy who has 5 loaves of barley bread, which is low-quality bread, and a couple of fish... *but what are these for so many.*"

The point is being hammered home—there are thousands of people and we have very little food and very little money.

Then Jesus goes to work. He takes the loaves, gives thanks, and begins distributing them to those who were gathered. And I want you to pay attention to the things that John now says... listen to these words... Jesus distributes *as much as they wanted*. And when they had *eaten their fill*, they gathered up *leftovers* and filled *twelve baskets full of leftover bread*.

We began with many people and no food and no money and now we're getting this:

People getting much as they want

People eating their fill

Leftovers remaining

And more left over than they even originally began with

What John wants us to feel here is amazing Abundance. It's not just a little for everyone, it's abundant. There's more than they need—exponentially more. The glass of wine is spilling over on your hand, overflowing. It is full and rich and abundant and beyond all expectation. There's more here than you could ever dream. What Jesus gives is exponentially more than what is needed.

Now, if the passage stopped here, that's really all we would need to focus on. But it doesn't stop there. In fact, this is where it gets weird. Look at verse 14. The people say, "This is indeed the Prophet who is to come into the world," and then they want to take Jesus by force and make him king and so Jesus slips out the back.

What's going on here? Well, if you look back at the end of chapter 5, you see Jesus saying this... verse 46... "If you believed Moses, you would believe me; for he wrote about me." What Jesus is referring to, and what this crowd is picking up on, is introduced in Deuteronomy 18. If you have a Bible you can turn there with me if you want... Moses, in Deuteronomy 18:15 and following says this:

` The Lord your God will raise up for you a prophet like me from among you, from your brothers—it is to him you shall listen— just as you desired of the Lord your God at Horeb on the day of the assembly, when you said, 'Let me not hear again the voice of the Lord my God or see this great fire any more, lest I die.' And the Lord said to me, 'They are right in what they have spoken. I will raise up for them a prophet like you from among their

brothers. And I will put my words in his mouth, and he shall speak to them all that I command him.

What God is saying through Moses here is that Moses is setting the stage for one to come after him. Moses is a precursor for who will come after him. And that stage begins to fill with Joshua and with the establishment of the office of prophet in Israel, but the expectation is that it will be fulfilled by the Messiah.

Now, think for a minute about who Moses is and it will help us understand what these people are trying to do. Moses was not only a prophet—speaking the words of God—but he was a leader. And how did he lead? He led God's people out of bondage in Egypt and into freedom. And remember what time of year it is? It's Passover. The celebration of God using Moses to lead his people out of bondage and into freedom. In many ways, this is the celebration of national freedom. Like the 4th of July. Here's this guy who is performing miracles and doing miraculous signs and it's so clear. He's the one like Moses who will lead us out of bondage! He's the one who will finally get rid of these Romans who have been occupying our land for so long. He's the one who will finally take the throne like a real King and overthrow this empire that we are beholden to. Not the weak king we have who is just a Roman puppet, but a real king like David who will deliver us from our enemies and make us free again!

That's the expectation. That's why these people rush him to make him King. And that's also why Jesus wants no part of it. Because their image of the Messiah... the one they have been building in their heads for hundreds of years... their image of the great King and Prophet to come does not match the reality of who Jesus is. And it's not too big. It's too small.

What Jesus has just shown is that he has power in abundance. More than anyone could imagine. He's just shown that he provides in abundance. More than anyone could dream. And that abundance does not fit well with the expectations that are in place. The desires that the crowd has are way too small for Jesus' abundant work. So much so that they are incompatible.

Let's listen to what some others (much smarter than me) have to say about this. First, listen to this quote (one of my favorites) from C.S. Lewis. He captures so well the incongruences at play here:

If we consider the unblushing promises of reward and the staggering nature of the rewards promised in the Gospels, it would seem that Our Lord finds our desires not too strong, but too weak. We are half-hearted creatures, fooling about with drink and sex and ambition when infinite joy is offered us, like an ignorant child who wants to go on making mud pies in a slum because he cannot imagine what is meant by the offer of a holiday at the sea. We are far too easily pleased.

And Lesslie Newbigin, a British theologian and author, comments on this passage...

“Jesus will not be the instrument of any human enthusiasm or the symbol for any human program. To say ‘Jesus is King’ is true if the word king is wholly defined by the person of Jesus; it is false and blasphemous if Jesus is made instrumental to a definition of kingship derived from elsewhere.”

And John Piper, a Baptist preacher and author in Minnesota, sums it up this way...

“Jesus didn't come into the world to lend his power to already existing appetites. That's the fundamental mistake of the prosperity gospel. Leave people untransformed in what they crave, and simply add the power of Jesus as the way to get it. That is not the gospel. It is a kind of acclamation that Jesus walks away from.”

What they are all saying is that what Jesus brings does not fit the image we often have of what we want him to give. We so often want him to be the power to fuel our desires. But he wants to change our desires, not just enable them. We often want him to give us the things that we want, but what he wants most is to give us himself. His abundance does not often match our small desires. And if that's the Jesus we think we're getting, then he doesn't want any part of it.

So what do we do when we come to this picture of Jesus? What do we do when we see this kind of abundance? The only thing we can do is to let that abundance crush our categories. To let it overwhelm us. To let it push out our small desires. We need to be so overwhelmed with his abundance that it changes what we even want from Him.

How do we do this practically? Well, first, it needs to change the way we pray. Should we pray for the things that we think that we need? Yes. Jesus tells us to pray for provision. But we need to be ready for those desires to be overwhelmed by what Jesus gives. We need to be ready for those desires to be revolutionized. I think that also means that we end up praying more for Jesus to give us himself than we pray for him to give us some things that we think we need.

Second, I think we need to ponder what it means for us to have a King. Not just us personally, but as a church, what does it mean to have a King that we *follow*? Not one that we elect. Or one that we find because he seems to have the power to give us what we want. But what does it mean to have a King? A Lord? That we as a people desire to follow, even when it unsettles our corporate desires.

And I think thirdly, what does it look like to proclaim this King to the rest of the world? The people here seem very insular to me. Very concerned about their own needs and desires. But what Jesus is about to show them is that He is not just here to give them bread when they are hungry. He's here to BE the bread. And that bread is meant to be given, not just consumed. So what does it mean to, as a church, to proclaim that king to the people around us? In our actions. Our words. Our life.

What is the image of Jesus you have created? Is it abundant enough? It is big enough to include who Jesus really is? And what's your image of yourself? Are you full and doing just fine and need a little help getting the stuff you want out of life? Or are you hungry, needing the Lord to feed of his very self, so that you might be filled with the abundance of his grace and provision? We need to hear the same thing I tell prospective couples: *don't fall in love with the image. It will only disappoint. Because it's not real. Fall in love with Jesus and you'll find out that He is so much better than your expectations.*