

## Sacred Sufficiency

Sermon Delivered By  
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Theologian and Pastor Eugene Peterson, in *The Message*, his inspired contemporary translation of the Bible, presents the eighth verse of Second Corinthians 9 this way: “God can pour on the blessings in astonishing ways so that you’re ready for anything and everything, more than ready to do what needs to be done.” The New Revised Standard translation renders the same verse: “God is able to provide you with every blessing in abundance, so that by always having enough of everything, you may share abundantly in every good work.” The New English Bible says: “...it is in God’s power to provide you richly with every good gift; thus you will have ample means in yourselves to meet each and every situation, with enough and to spare...” Clarence Jordan, in his Cotton Patch Version of Paul’s Epistles, offers this wording: “Now God is able to shower on you every kind of favor, so that when you have plenty of everything for any occasion, you yourselves may shower every sort of kind deed on others.” And here is 2 Corinthians 9:8 from the Good News Bible: “And God is able to give you more than you need, so that you will always have all you need for yourselves and more than enough for every good cause.” No matter how it is said: “God can pour on the blessings...”, “God is able to shower on you every kind of favor”, “It is in God’s power to provide you richly with every good gift”, each of these translations and interpretations of this portion of Second Corinthians affirms the same point: God has the capacity to meet humanity’s every need while in the process empowering us to do the same”.

But here’s the tough question for people of faith. If it is true, as Gene Peterson puts it, that “God’s right-living, right-giving ways never run out, never wear out”, why don’t we live as if we believe it? If God truly is able to provide for every need, why do we worry so much about what we have – or don’t have – or, perhaps more to the point, about who has more than we do? Why is it so hard for us to love our neighbors as ourselves: to care about their well-being in the same way we care about our own? Whenever I ask myself those questions, I find some comfort in the realization that even those who were closest to Jesus, even the disciples themselves, didn’t behave as though they believed with heart, mind, soul, and spirit that God can meet every human need. Today’s Gospel story is a revealing example.

There the disciples were, on one of the hills that rise steeply along the shore of the Sea of Galilee, surrounded by an enthusiastic crowd of more than 4000 people who had come seeking the miracle of Jesus’ healing touch as he sat with them. It was late

in the day, and people were hungry. Jesus was concerned that folks were famished, and he wanted to provide food for them. What to do?

The disciples had been in a similar situation earlier in their ministry with Jesus when he was followed by an even larger crowd to an out-of-the-way place on the lakeshore. There, Jesus had also asked them to help him feed the people. They had started out with what seemed to them – and still seems to us – to be a completely inadequate supply of food: five loaves of bread and two fish. But as they distributed what they thought would be far too little, they found that there was plenty. They experienced firsthand the transforming truth that despite their misgivings, there was the means available to satisfy the hunger of all the people around them. Much to their surprise, they discovered that there was enough for everyone – and to spare.

Now, here they were on a high place with a big crowd, facing practically the same set of circumstances once again. However, although they had personally experienced God's capacity to meet urgent needs with astonishing abundance, they still reverted to their anxieties and misgivings.

Notice how the dialogue proceeds. Jesus said, "I have compassion for the crowd because they have been with me three days and have nothing to eat..." He focused on the people and expressed concern that their prolonged hunger could cause health problems or accidents. His disciples focused on themselves, asking: "Where are we to get enough bread in the desert to feed so great a crowd?" Maybe they were irritated, viewing the crowd as a bunch of 'hangers on' looking for a hand-out. Maybe they were feeling overwhelmed by the seemingly endless demands on their time and energy from so many people in need. Maybe they were having second thoughts about the ministry of compassion and healing in which Jesus was so personally engaged. Whatever their feelings, their first thought was for themselves rather than for those around them.

Jesus then asked, "How many loaves do you have?" The disciples responded, "Seven, and a few small fish." Within Jesus' question, there was an expression of confidence that food was available right there. And there was food there: bread and fish. However, when the disciples respond, they give us a clue that they see scarcity rather than sufficiency. As commentator and Pastor Tom Long observes, the disciples use "the language of diminished resources". Nevertheless, despite the disciples' inability to trust in sacred sufficiency, God, through Jesus' ministry of compassion and care, provides plenty, feeding all of the people with more than enough!

How very like us those first disciples were! How hard it was for them - and how hard it remains for us – to trust in God's abundant provision for human need. This story, indeed all of the Biblical corpus, celebrates the holy and liberating truth of sacred

sufficiency. There is enough – and to spare! Whether on a large scale or a small scale, as Clarence Jordan put it, “God has the power to provide plenty of everything for any occasion.” Despite all the evidence to the contrary, despite all of our hesitations, anxieties, and misgivings, despite our inability to believe it, God is able to provide bountifully for every need.

Although we insist on working too hard and praying too little, as antidote to all our stressful, anxious striving, there is within each human spirit a gentle, quiet center cleansed and invigorated by the breath of God’s Holy Spirit, a place at the core of who we are where we can find the spiritual nourishment that feeds our wisest, most centered, compassionate, and whole self. It is not a place of wanting, having, and worrying. Here we no longer live with the anxious mindset of scarcity, lack, overwork, exhaustion, and stress. This is not the home of the false prophets of ‘you can have it all.’

Quite the contrary. It is a realm beyond sight and touch, a sacred place of holy simplicity and deep inner peace rising from profound trust in God’s capacity to meet our every need. It is not a place of retreat from the world or denial of the violent, noisy, distracted, polarized, and bitterly divided and sinfully unjust reality that constantly seeks to convince us that’s all there is. It is a place of verdant green pastures and still waters that run deep, a place where the soul can rest and be refreshed and the heart is at home. And when we have the courage to let God show us how to live centered in that gentle, simple, soul-filling, God-blessed place, we are truly made new creations, full of hope, confidence, energy to do justice, and true joy. For there is in that place, a silent truth, about which poet Wendell Berry has written so well:

*Geese appear high over us,  
pass, and the sky closes. Abandon,  
as in love or sleep, holds  
them to their way, clear  
in the ancient faith; what we need  
is here. And we pray, not  
for new earth or heaven, but to be  
quiet in heart, and in eye,  
clear. What we need is here.*