

John 6: 1-21
July 25, 2021

“Extra Grace”
Rev. Meredith Kemp-Pappan

One of Henry’s picture books tells the story of Annabelle who, on a cold, wintry day, found a box filled with colorful yarn. So she knit herself a sweater. And when she was finished, she had extra yarn, so she knit a sweater for her dog. And when she was done knitting the dog sweater, she still had extra yarn, so she knit a sweater for the little boy down the street. As it turns out, even after knitting all these sweaters, there was still extra yarn in the box. So Annabelle made sweaters for all her classmates, all the townspeople, and even the animals. Soon the entire town is decked out in colorful sweaters and cozies.

But despite her abundant knitting, there is always extra yarn.

If you had a magic box that never seemed to exhaust its resources, what would you want it to have? Yarn? Money? Tacos? In today’s Gospel reading from John, Jesus’s disciples, along with a staggering and hungry crowd, witness a miracle of abundance. Like Annabelle and her unending stash of yarn, the disciples discover that five loaves and two fish are plenty to feed over 5,000 people, with extra to spare.

One must be cautious when preaching on the “loaves and the fishes,” not just because it is a familiar story for many of us, but because it challenges our notions of stewardship. While fanciful boxes of yarn make for a good children’s fable, it is hardly a model for church budgeting. And if Jesus had ever served on a Fellowship Committee, then he would have known that a young boy’s lunch would hardly be enough to feed a hungry crowd. Part of good stewardship of resources means that congregations, just like any organization, ought to live within their means.

Yet what sets churches apart from, say, the Kiwanis Club is that churches are also called to participate in the economy of abundance known as the Kingdom of God. In God’s kingdom, there is enough yarn for everyone to wear a colorful sweater, just as there is plenty of food on the table so that all may eat. The abundance come from God. The danger in preaching about abundance is that God’s abundance defies human logic. Human logic says that a boy of yarn will eventually exhaust itself. Five loaves of bread are hardly enough for a growing boy, let alone thousands. A bank account can only stretch so far. Yet God invites us in to a reality when resources are blessed and multiplied, so that they can bless others. As a faith leader, I often wrestle with learning how to trust God in the midst of seemingly insurmountable odds. I see the budgets, the broken refrigerator, the leaky pipes and

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sometimes, I panic. All the while I remind you, the congregation to have faith in God’s provision, even while I doubt.

But I didn’t tell you the rest of Annabelle’s story. Word of Annabelle’s box of yarn spread far and wide. An Archduke from a faraway land sailed over to meet Annabelle. He offered her tens of millions of dollars for her box. But Annabelle refused. So in the middle of the night, the Archduke sent robbers to steal the box from her. The Archduke sails back home. When he arrives, he settles in his easy chair, opens the box of yarn...

...only to find it empty!

Enraged, he throws the box out the window, where it finally makes its way back Annabelle. The last page of the book shows Annabelle, reunited with her box, sitting in a tree covered in brightly-colored knitting.

It is not always easy to trust in God’s provision. But what Annabelle’s story reminds us is that there is always extra when we seek the well-being of others. When the Archduke acts selfishly and steals the box, he finds it empty because he has no love to give. In contrast, the more Annabelle knits for her friends and neighbors, the more her box yields yarn. In the same way, when we seek the physical and spiritual well-being of others, God will bless our work. And thus, with every act of love born from abundance, the grace of God is revealed. As one pastor reminds us, “ministry is about multiplying resources so that what might have been a social handout becomes a revelation of amazing grace.”¹

Because that’s what all this church stuff is about, really. Revealing the grace of God to others. Even when we don’t quite believe or have faith that God’s grace is going to sustain us, we can still bring others to God. We can still keep on knitting with the faith that as long as we pursue justice and righteousness, God will keep replenishing our yarn. During this pandemic, there were many times when I thought that the church’s yarn would be exhausted, and that I would go to the box, only to find an empty spool. But every time Trinity said “yes” to God’s call to

¹ Bartlett, David L. and Taylor, Barbara Brown (2011-05-31). Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3, Pentecost and Season after Pentecost 1 (Prophets 3-16) (Feasting on the Word: Year B volume) (Kindle Locations 10132-10133). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.

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serve, the yarn was there. When God called us, through the Rescue Mission, to assist in Operation Food Secure, we said yes. That ministry took a lot of yarn. But when that ministry concluded, we took up our needles yet again, and with the extra yarn, partnered with Harvesters to distribute food. And When COVID moved our ministry to online only, I worried that we would only have a few inches of yarn, and yet, our ministries flourished.

How is this possible? Because, when placed in the hands of Jesus, our resources become more than enough. In 1946, when Mother Teresa came face to face with the masses of suffering and dying in Calcutta, she experienced what she called the “call within the call,” namely, to serve those suffering the most. Certainly her knowledge or her wealth or her wisdom would not be enough to fulfill a calling to the poorest of the earth. Yet love’s knowledge fueled the passion of that call, and with that passion she began the Missionaries of Charity, a small order of thirteen members. In the ensuing decades, the order grew to thousands of members giving care in many orphanages and charity centers. Love’s knowledge multiplies the meager resources and makes a way forward when knowledge comes to its end.²

Defying odds and our understanding, God uses meager resources and multiplies them to serve God’s purposes. When we seek to serve others with Love, we will find that there is more than enough—there is extra besides. Thanks be to God! Amen.

² Bartlett, David L. and Taylor, Barbara Brown (2011-05-31). Feasting on the Word: Year B, Volume 3, Pentecost and Season after Pentecost 1 (Prophets 3-16) (Feasting on the Word: Year B volume) (Kindle Locations 10247-10249). Westminster John Knox Press. Kindle Edition.