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Grace Episcopal Church, Hopkinsville, KY

Pentecost 8/Proper 13/Year A/Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 17:1-7, 16; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21.

“The Abundance of God’s Blessing”

In the name of God, Creator, Redeemer, Breath of Life. Amen.

Isak Dinesen, Danish writer and story-teller, created the story of “Babette’s Feast,” which later became an Oscar-winning film. A few of us watched it together during Lent this year. The story takes place in a small village in a remote area on the coast of Denmark in the 19th century. A devout clergyman who preaches a gospel of self-denial and rejection of all worldly appetites is leader of a small religious sect. His two beautiful daughters, appropriately named Martina and Philippa, for Martin Luther and his colleague Philip Melancthon, lead austere lives, devoted to the service of others. Their diet is basically thin soup and bread and water. One of them has a beautiful voice but turns down the opportunity to perform and perhaps become famous. The other rejects the opportunity of marriage. Time passes, the clergyman dies, and a Parisian woman named Babette, a refugee from the French civil war, joins their household as an unpaid servant and family member.

The community manages to hold together, but, as communities tend to do over time, the members become critical and testy and contentious with each other. They are unhappy people. The harsh weather on that coast in Denmark is a reflection of the relationships among them. More years pass, and, on the occasion of their father’s 100th birthday, Martina and Philippa want to honor his memory with a celebration. Coincidentally, Babette has won a French lottery and decides that she wants to prepare a great French feast for the occasion. The sisters and other

members of the group, who are now elderly, are skeptical about how they can participate in this sumptuous feast in good conscience. After all, fulfillment of worldly appetites is against their religion. But, out of their love for Babette, they agree to accept her offer. As a way of coping, they decide that they will simply make no mention of the food itself—before, during, or after the feast—no mention of even noticing the taste--no admission of any enjoyment.

By chance, there is an outsider who joins them as a guest, the man who had earlier been in love with one of the sisters. He is not of their religious persuasion and not aware of their decision not to speak about the food, much less enjoy it. As various fine wines are tasted and various culinary delights are consumed—turtle soup, caviar, quail--the guest speaks more and more about how delectable the food is and what a joy it is to eat. The community politely ignores what he says and keeps changing the subject. But, as the guest eats his food with greater and greater gusto, his spirit becomes contagious and the others begin smacking their lips and licking their fingers. They start talking about fond memories of their beloved patriarch, Martina and Philippa's father, how he would say to them, "Little children, love one another." Their testiness with each other transforms into kindness and gentleness and affection. Their meal becomes more and more enjoyable. The guest remembers and tells them about a chef in a fine restaurant in Paris who had the ability to "turn a meal into a love affair." At the end of their meal, he stands and reflects on this eating experience that they have shared, describing it in these words--"Mercy and truth have met together. Righteousness and bliss shall kiss one another . . . I have learned that in this beautiful world of ours, all things are possible."

After the guests have left, gratefully at peace with each other, Babette reveals to the sisters that she is the chef that the guest was talking about and that she has used her entire lottery

winnings to pay for this dinner—the amount it would take to pay for a fine dinner for twelve at the restaurant in Paris. She has no money now to return to Paris, but she is an artist and she has done her best work. She has given it all away.

Over and over in the stories in our gospels, Jesus is giving it all away. The God that Jesus reveals to us deals in abundance and generosity. In today's story of the feeding of the hungry crowd of more than 5,000, Jesus doesn't just give them a snack to carry them over until they can go home and have a real meal. They eat until they are filled. And, not only are they filled, but there are lots of leftovers.

God's abundance is hard for us to believe. Even though God is a God of abundance, we are too often people of scarcity. In his book What Happy People Know, psychologist Dan Baker writes about how fear, in its various manifestations, is the major impediment to happiness in contemporary society. And, one of these manifestations of fear is the fear of scarcity. That fear of scarcity is all too real at times. We have all had our moments in recent years—with huge economic fluctuations—in the value of retirement accounts and property and sometimes even in the necessities of life.

A few years ago, there was a “New-Agey” belief that was popular that essentially said that we don't need to be concerned about scarcity—that there is enough for everyone and that all we need to do is to share and not hoard—that spending generously is good and creates more and more for all to enjoy—that thinking in terms of abundance will bring about abundance. Then, some other people started challenging that belief and looking at what it will take to feed more and more people around the globe, especially with the natural disasters of the past few years that have interfered with usual productivity. A more realistic view is that there probably is enough

for all if we don't go overboard with hoarding, if we commit ourselves to the well-being of all, and if we learn to curb our desires for more and more of what we don't need in the first place.

Dan Matthews, former rector at Trinity Church Wall Street, tells the story of being away from New York City and spending some time at his home in the North Carolina mountains. He made a quick run to Wal-Mart one day because he discovered that it was the only place in the area where he could find a certain kind of battery for his camera. He picked up his battery in the back of the store and headed for the door, but his eyes landed on a display of Coca Colas that were available at such a good price that he got a big shopping cart and picked up three or four cases of them. He went a little further and discovered that paper towels seemed ridiculously cheap in comparison to New York City prices, so he picked up several rolls. He again headed for the door, but he kept finding wonderful bargains and filling his cart. By the time he got to his car, he had enough great deals to almost fill up his wife's Subaru station wagon. When he got home, his wife came out to greet him. She noticed the car and quietly wandered around it. After looking into all the windows, she remarked, "And we don't need any of it."

Dan goes on to tell of an article that ran in the Wall Street Journal sometime back describing the remarkable growth in the development and construction of mini-warehouses—those places that we rent to store our stuff when all the closets are full and the attic and basement and garage are bursting at the seams. We have a yearning to buy more and more, especially if the price is right, because it is easy to slip into a mentality of scarcity.

Happiness doesn't come from futile attempts to satisfy our demons—to buy more and more, to find bigger and better bargains or own bigger and better toys. Our key to happiness as people of God is in knowing that we are blessed by God—when we can let go of any sense of

being cursed and fully claim God's blessing—when we take seriously the biblical imperative to “be not afraid.” In our wonderful Old Testament lesson for today, I believe that Jacob went away from Peniel, or Penuel, that morning as a happy man. He has had some nightmarish hours of wrestling with God. He refuses to give up the wrestling match even though his hip is thrown out of joint. He will not give up the fight until he knows that he has received God's blessing. What an audacious interaction with God—“I will not let you go, unless you bless me”! Jacob knows that there are challenges ahead, and he knows he cannot meet up to them without a new identity—a new name—without God's blessing. And so, that morning, even though he is limping, he has received what he needs and can go on his way.

May we—like Jacob—move away from fear and open ourselves to receiving the abundance of God's blessing—that we may become that blessing as we follow the path that Jesus leads us to take. Amen.