

"LORD, WHAT A BOUNTIFUL GOD!"

A Sermon By

Philip A. C. Clarke

Park Avenue United Methodist Church
106 East 86th Street
New York, New York 10028
June 23, 1991

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INTRODUCTION

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Before he came back over to the bar, a man wearing a black threadbare coat came into the saloon and walked up to the bartender and timidly said,

"Sir...I'm a poor traveling Methodist circuit rider. And I've just made it across the desert. I'm bone dry. Could you let me have that foamy glass of milk I see you've just poured and put out here on the bar?"

With a twinkle in his eye, the bartender said:

"Take the milk, preacher...we're glad to have you in our town. Take the glass of milk...and drink it up...."

The preacher drank the glass of milk real slow...savoring every drop. Then he looked up at the ceiling and with a smile on his face he declared, "Lord... what a cow!"

DEVELOPMENT

Now I hope that none of you are offended by that little piece of humor, but this morning I want to talk for a few moments about the bounteous goodness of God for there are those times in life when we feel like declaring, "Lord...what a bountiful God".

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And remember how Andrew came to the rescue, saying:

"Lord...there's a lad here who has five barley loaves and two fish...but what are they among so many?...."

And Jesus quietly said, "Make the people sit down". They did. Three thoughts to share.

TAKE TIME TO SIT DOWN

First of all, I think we experience the bounty of God when we do take the time to sit down...and reflect a bit on life.

Mother Theresa has said that the biggest problem facing the world today is not people dying in the streets of Calcutta. The biggest problem, she says, is "spiritual deprivation".

She describes this as a "feeling of emptiness" associated with feeling separate from God and from all our brothers and sisters on Planet Earth. There are people within the shadow of this Church who know about that kind of emptiness.

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"Before the missionaries came to Hawaii, my people used to sit outside their temples for a long time meditating and preparing themselves before entering. Then they would virtually creep to the altar to offer their petition and afterward would again sit a long time outside, this time to 'breathe life' into their prayers. The Christians when they came just 'went up'...uttered a few sentences, said 'Amen' and were done. For that reason my people called them 'haolis'...'without breath', or those who failed to breathe life into their prayers."

Now it may be that the reason many of us live barren and empty lives is that we rarely set aside time any more to "breathe" life into our prayers. We are so busy doing...so caught up in our own "rat race"...so pressed for time... that we have cut out that which gives us the strength and the courage and the vitality that we need to strive successfully.

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So, Fabre captured enough caterpillars to encircle the rim of a flowerpot. He then linked them nose to posterior and started them walking in the closed circle. For days they turned like a perpetual merry-go-round. Although food was near at hand and accessible, the caterpillars started to death on an endless march to nowhere.

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Had she already been evicted? Some time later on he discovered that the woman had been at home all the time, that she had been afraid to answer the door fearing that it was her landlord who had come to collect the rent. All the time she cowered in fear. The man knocking on her door was her minister, bringing her the money she so desperately needed.

When you and I shut God out of our lives, we, too, are shutting out the very One who can meet our deepest needs. His greatest wish is to provide. His nature is to give. He is love and love is always giving. If we are not receiving from Him, the problem could be on our end, for He is a giving God. When people say to me as they sometimes do..."God seems far away"...I am often tempted to respond, "Who's moved - you or God?"

There are those times in life when we are simply blind to His wondrous bounty. We're like the tragic residents of one of America's first village. They say that during the Winter of 1610, the population of Jamestown, Virginia went down from about 500 people to 60. While disease and Indians took some, most of the settlers in that colony started...they simply starved. There were plentiful supplies of fish and oysters and fowl and deer but these settlers from the city were not accustomed to obtaining food from the land and hence, they starved.

And sometimes we act the same way. God comes to us continually in the person of the Holy Spirit to guide us and empower us. As a loving Father, He awaits the opportunity to meet our needs but we are not accustomed to receiving from His loving hand. Nor does it occur to us to pray. So we tend to wander blindly from problem to problem...a sort of picture of those early settlers who starved in this land of plenty.

"Make the people sit down" Jesus commanded His disciples. And then He took the loaves and when He had given thanks, He distributed the loaves and the fish to all who were seated, as much as they wanted...enough for everyone. So also do we receive God's blessings when we sit and wait and pause to be open and receptive to what He has to offer. John concludes this story with these words,

"So, they gathered them up and filled twelve baskets with fragments from the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten. And when the people saw the sign which He had done, they said, 'This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world!'"

GOD IS A PROVIDER

When we sit and wait upon the Lord and when we receive what He has to offer us, we begin to discover that God is indeed a bounteous provider for His children's many needs. This is point three.

One of the lessons that Jesus tried to teach His followers was what you might call the "extravagance" of God. He is the God who provides in abundance... who sets before us a table in the midst of our enemies...who fills the cup to over-flowing. Who when wine is needed for the wedding feast tells us to fill the water skins and fill them to the brim...who when the Prodigal Son returns home kills the fatted calf and throws a big party. Most of the worries that beset us would disappear in a moment if we could only lean back and rest ourselves in the extravagance of God's provisions for all of our needs. All of nature

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"The sun which has all those planets revolving around about it and depending on it for their orderly functions can ripen a bunch of grapes as if it had nothing else in the world to do."

And it doesn't! God has brought into being a magnificent creation with the sole purpose of providing for His children's needs. It's mind boggling and how careless we are, at times, with this splendid universe. But, why such extravagance and why such bounty and why such seeming waste?

Generations ago John Spencer offered an interesting theory which suggests an answer. He noted that the Jewish Rabbis taught that when Joseph, in the times of plenty, had gathered much corn in Egypt, he threw the chaff into the River Nile. His purpose was to convey by means of the flowing river to cities and nations more remote the "Good News" of the abundance laid up - not for themselves alone - but for others also....for all mankind we might say.

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If there be such glory in God's footstool, what is there in His throne? If He gives us so much in the land of our pilgrimage, what will He not give us in our own country? If He bestoweth so much on His enemies, what will He not give His friends?"

Perhaps this is the reason for God's extravagance. Who knows, perhaps He is preparing us for the greater extravagance of Heaven. I should like to think so.

I'm reminded of two fellas who died recently and were walking the "golden streets" of God's celestial realm. There was more beauty and more splendor and more joy there than they had ever dreamed imaginable. One of them turned to the other and said, "Isn't this absolutely wonderful?" And the other replied,

"Yes! Unbelievable. And to think we could have gotten here ten years sooner if we hadn't eaten all that oat bran!"

Look around you. God has so many blessings to pour out on all of us. He asks us to sit down and receive what He has to give and that which He gives, He gives with extravagance beyond all measure. So, enjoy this day. This world. This time and remember that line from Second Corinthians as well (2: 9):

"Eye hath not seen nor ear heard, nor the heart of man conceived WHAT God has prepared for those who love Him."

PRAYER Make us sensitive to Your nearness in these quiet moments, O God, as we sit here and receive your blessings. We have so much for which to be thankful...stir us and lift us as we go out into the world and let us through our words and deeds move others to say, "Lord, what a God these Christians believe in". In the name and spirit of Christ. Amen.

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