

More than enough: John 6:1-21

by [Charles Hoffman](#) in the [July 25, 2006](#) issue

The church of my youth majored in a miserly view of God's grace. Its message was grim. Life had no edge, no elegance and no joy, but was only a bitter temporal existence largely limited to preparations for the sweet hereafter. Our bleak church building reflected the theology: it was aptly situated in the Pacific Northwest with its endless days of dreary, overcast weather. The clouds and drizzle and fog seemed to cling to our clothes whenever we entered our church for worship. That early religion held no attraction for me, but I was bound to it by the guilt and fear it engendered in me.

All of that changed when a new minister walked into our church. He was winsome, engaging, honest and without guile. One Sunday morning he preached the most important sermon of my life. His text was John 10:10: "I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly." I still remember the message: Christ calls us to a life of fullness, affirmation and joy. In that moment the Word reached out and claimed me.

In the 50 years since that memorable sermon I have been intrigued by a theme from the fourth Gospel, the theme of *abundance*. It is a constant refrain and it shows up in John 6. We all know the story, but we never tire of telling it.

A crowd of people has followed Jesus to the lakeshore. Their attraction to him is so strong that in their excitement they forget the picnic lunch. Jesus leans over to Philip and says, "Philip, how are we going to buy enough food to feed these people?" It is a test. And Philip, who represents the church, replies the way the church often replies to a crisis: "We're done for. Half a year's wages wouldn't be enough to feed all these people." And then, as Philip continues to mumble, his colleague Andrew informs Jesus that a boy in the crowd is carrying a couple of fish and a few loaves of bread. "But so little as that," says Andrew, "is really quite irrelevant under the circumstances."

I once read a poem that helps me anticipate Christ's response to Andrew on that day:

Be gentle when you touch bread
Let it not lie uncared for—unwanted
So often bread is taken for granted
There is so much beauty in bread
Beauty of sun and soil, beauty of honest toil
Winds and rain have caressed it, Christ often blessed it
Be gentle when you touch bread.

“There is a boy here who has five barley loaves,” Andrew says.

“Make the people sit down,” replies the Lord. The meal is blessed, served, then eaten, and—when all are satisfied—there is enough left over to fill 12 baskets. Abundance!

Abundance is a theme throughout the fourth Gospel. In the first chapter John speaks about Jesus as the Word from whose fullness we have all received grace upon grace. Consider the first sign, when water is turned into wine at the wedding in Cana. Jesus instructs the servants to fill some jars with water, and they fill them to the brim. The result is a profusion, not merely of wine, but of good wine. Then, at a community well in Samaria, Jesus tells a woman about living water gushing up to eternal life. Once more, this note of abundance. In the beautiful departure speech in the 14th chapter of John, we hear, “In my Father’s house there are many dwelling places,” and at the end of the Gospel, John brings his witness to a close by noting that in addition to the things he has told us, there is so much more that if it were all reduced to writing, there wouldn’t be enough space in the world to contain the number of books that would be required.

Whether it is wine at a wedding or rooms for eternity or picnic food, there is always more than enough, a prodigious supply. Wherever we go in John’s Gospel we are confronted with this profuse and full-measured flood of God’s grace mediated through the Christ. On the basis of John’s telling, God’s grace is more prodigal than it is miserly.

My own early impressions of a melancholy religion still hold for many in our culture; in fact, it’s one reason for the lack of growth in many North American churches. As Nietzsche said, “Christians will have to look more redeemed if people are to believe in their Redeemer.” Indeed, people are still drawn to that which nourishes and enriches their lives.

Much of the time our faith mirrors that of Philip and Andrew, who could not see past the six months' wages or the meager five loaves and two fish. We tend to base our living on our own scarcity or even on our own fears of insufficiency. So we hoard and save and worry and end up living life in small and safe measures. We pull back when we should push forward. We give in to our fear of a shortfall rather than exercising faith in God's abundance. But Christians are constantly on call to go places where we have never been, to do things that we have never attempted and to be things we have never envisioned.

John 6 invites us to live into a grace-filled inheritance, a timely calling because most of us tend to live on the edges of what God has to offer. We are challenged to take seriously God's generous offer of life not, of course, so that we might end up being wealthy in this world, but so that we will position ourselves for the adventure of faith that enriches and enlivens those who embrace its challenge.