

A Sermon Preached by Peter Ilgenfritz  
University Congregational United Church of Christ  
Seattle, Washington August 6, 2006

I couldn't get over the contrast:

**“Lebanon loses link to aid; food getting low”**

*(Headline, Seattle Times, August 5, 2006, p.1)*

*Lebanese President Emile Lahoud accused Israel of waging a “war of starvation”.*

*The Israeli army bombed the last highway from Beirut to the outside world. Groceries have run out of essentials – milk, baby food and canned goods.*

\* \* \* \* \*

*And here, today's gospel reading:*

*On a hillside in Israel, a mere 20 miles from the Lebanese border, 5000 people are hungry.*

*There is little money and no supplies but five barley loaves and two fish that some little kid has brought along.*

*But Jesus took those gifts, blessed, broke and distributed them – and after everyone was filled there was enough left over to fill twelve baskets.*

There is no food....and in a time of no food there is food with Jesus.

Today's theme of our summer preaching series on the Building Blocks of Faith is “God takes care of me.” And the word today that we are invited to trust in is that with Jesus, in Jesus,

There is **Life**,  
There is **Abundance**,  
There is **Enough**.

The Gospel of John is a Gospel of Abundance.

It is John's Jesus who says, “***I came that they may have life and have it abundantly.***” (John 10:10)

The Gospel of John begins with Jesus coming into the world as the Word from whom we have all received grace upon grace upon grace. (John 1:16)

It is John's Jesus of Abundance who fills vats to the brim with water and turns them into overflowing vats of fine wine. (John 2:1-11)

John's Jesus who tells a Samaritan woman of a well of living water gushing up to eternal life. (John 4)

This is the Jesus who says in my Father's house there is not one dwelling place – but *many dwelling places*. (John 14:2)

And John closes his Gospel noting there is so much more that could be said that if it were all reduced to writing there wouldn't be enough space in the whole world to contain the number of books that would be required. (John 21:24-25)

In the face of today's headlines, where are we going to stand?

Are we going to stake our lives on God's abundant grace that we know through Jesus Christ and allow the presence of such grace to change our lives?

Or are we going to give into the false gospel and the corporate and national lie that pervades our land and choose to believe that we are not enough, we don't have enough: A gospel of scarcity that wants us to fall back on our fears and insufficiency.

Too often in the face of the crises of the world we have to admit that our faith – my faith, your faith, the faith of the church – more often than not has mirrored the faith of Philip and Andrew.

Too often we stand there with Philip, look out on all those hungry people, shake our heads and cry,

“We're done for! Half a year's wages wouldn't be enough to feed all those people!”

Or we stand there with Andrew and toss off as irrelevant the gifts we do have – a couple of fish and a few loaves of bread.

And so we – you, me, all of us – end up hoarding and saving and worrying.

We end up living small and safe.

We pull back when we should be pushing forward.

We give into our fears of a shortfall rather than exercising our faith in God's abundance.

We do not live the lives that we are called to live, that we were made to live.

Atheist Frederick Nietzsche had a lot of important things to say to the church. And one of the important things he had to say was, **“Christians will have to look more redeemed if people are to believe in their Redeemer.”**

Why is it that we followers of this Jesus of Abundant Life stand around too often looking so somber and serious and done for?

Why is it that we are trapped in doing what is **Reasonable** instead of what is **Right**?

In worrying so much about being **Nice** instead of preaching and speaking the **Truth in Love** to one another?

Why is it we spend so much time **Worrying** about how to please everyone that we never do what is **Required** of us?

But Thanks Be to God there were more than the disciples in the gospel story. There were also 5000 others who followed Jesus up that hillside – who saw something in Jesus called Life and Strength and Hope and Love and Abundance – something in him that had them scurrying out the door so fast that they forget their bag lunches at home.

They had **Truth** on their minds.

**A Hunger for Life.**

For **Abundant Life.**

For **True Bread.** For **Living Water.**

For the kind of **Life** they saw in **Jesus.**

Unlike the disciples, they had not given into Reasonable Expectations, Apathy or Despair.

They didn't play it safe. They went for Life.

The kind of life, the way of life, they saw in Jesus.

I can't tell you what it will mean if you and I follow this Jesus Way of Life that caught the imagination of those 5000 hungry souls – but I can assure you that it will mean **CHANGE** - for you, for me, for Christ's church.

I spent the last four days with a group of eight middle schoolers on our middle school mission trip to the Makah reservation at Neah Bay.

And let me tell you that we did lots of things on our trip but one thing we did not do: we never played it safe.

Instead we followed the Gospel call to :

**Go to places where we have never been,**

**Do things that we have never attempted,**

**Be things we have never envisioned.”**

(Charles Hoffman, “Living by the Word”, The Christian Century, July 25, 2006, p.18)

It reminded me of how we are called to **Life** in a culture that calls us too often to retreat in Fear and Hoarding and Safety, to Entrap us in the Myth of Scarcity which is the way of Death.

Instead, we went to Neah Bay where there was so much more that we Didn't Know than what we did.

We didn't know exactly what we were going to do there,  
what the place would be like where we were going to stay,  
who we would meet there.

We went on the only thing we got – and that is **Faith**.

That is **Trust** in the Jesus who goes with us and before us.

And we found **Good Work**,

**Good People**,

A **Good Place** to camp,

And a **Great Beach** with **Amazing Waves**.

On that first night, Kalen said, "I like that song, 'Amazing Grace'. Let's sing it for grace." And we learned the song and we learned again what grace is, the kind of grace that caught us again and again that day.

A whole lot of things were great about the week but for many of us one of the **BEST** things was the **WAVES**.

We couldn't stay out of them.

We wandered into them on Wednesday night with our clothes on.

And we came back to our campsite with sopping wet clothes  
that hung on the clothesline all week.

On Thursday and Friday we got smarter....

and ended the day by putting on our swim suits and running into the surf.

Oh it was **GROSS!**

The sea was **THICK** with **SEAWEED** –

the kind that tangles all around your legs and ankles,  
clings to your shoulders and gets stuck in your hair.

And oh, the water was **FREEZING!**

And all we could do was scream and yell –

**"Look, here comes another one!"** – as the waves crashed over our heads.

We rode them,

dove into them,

immersed ourselves in them.

We came out shivering, cold, and covered with seaweed.

And then we threw ourselves into game upon game upon game on the play field – and we learned that the ground is a lot harder than water.

I am sore from my hips down.

And I came back convicted.

I came back with a conviction that **we must raise up a generation of young people Strong enough, Courageous enough, Bold enough, full of Faith enough to throw themselves into the waves.**

We must raise up a generation of young people that will be **Bold** enough, be willing to **Risk** enough to be up to the **Challenge** of dealing with the mess of a world we are leaving them.

We must raise up a generation willing to **Risk it All** for **Abundance**, and **the kind of Abundant Life we see in the life of Jesus.**

And we must be a **Community of Christ** for one another as Erin and Dan Johnson, and Jennifer Gray were for us last week.

They were there as we tumbled out of the waves to catch us,  
to give us warm clothes to put on,  
hot food for our stomachs,  
and a warm fire to huddle around  
so that we could have the strength to go out  
once again and plunge ourselves into  
the **Work of God** to which we are called.

**We must be such a community for each other.**

For Dear God what is the alternative?

Is it playing it safe?

Not getting involved?

Is it making excuses, excuses such as this government makes of waiting for a “sustainable solution” instead of calling for an immediate cease fire between Hezbollah and Israel?

A ceasefire which we alone have the power to do, to enact today.  
And because we will not, do not, that is Evil.

For as one Lebanese chaplain said,

**“The time is always right for stopping a war, for holding back a fight, for checking the destruction of homes and livelihoods and young children , for peace and negotiation. The time is always right.”**

(Riad Kassis, “A ‘Prayer’ to Condoleezza Rice”,  
Christianity Today magazine.

Instead, we settle for sending Israel more and more bombs made in our factories,  
that we have paid for by our own tax dollars.

For our kids to learn about going for **Life** – for the **Jesus Life**- we must stop playing it safe as church. **“I came so that you may have life and have it abundantly”**, Jesus said.

**What’s holding us back?**

What Today are we called to risk for Life –  
for the kind of Life that Jesus calls me, you, the church to?

**What’s holding us back?**

Ethan noticed her first. The little girl that ran round and round the circle where we played. “I think she wants to play with us and doesn’t know how to ask”, he said.

We sent Lucy, Ethan’s sister, to go invite her. And the next thing we knew seven year old Sokura was out there on the field with us beating me (for sure!), and kids 11 and 12 and 13 years old at races. Wow that little girl was Fast!

And then Sokura’s friend Emily came by and we called her over to join us and she dropped her bike and ran over to play.

**Something was happening on that field that you didn’t want to miss.**

As twilight fell, and we drifted back to the campfire, Sokura and her mom came by to say thank you for inviting her in to play games. We invited them into our circle.

It wasn’t what we planned - but it was exactly what we needed.

We didn’t have bread to share – but we did have chocolate pudding.

They joined us as we laughed and told stories....and for our closing prayers.

Who would have thought?

Here we were – a bunch of UCC evangelists at the campground!

And we prayed as we did each night for all that we were thankful for - for risk and for play, for trying new things, for having time like this to pray when often we do not –and for a circle that had grown larger than where it started.

**What’s holding you back?**

**What’s holding us back?**

**“I came that you may have Life and have it Abundantly.”**

Pass the bread.

Go forth for Life!

Go forth to Live!      Amen.

\* \* \* \* \*

This sermon could not have been written without Anthony Asp, Lucy and Ethan Davis, Graham Garratt, Kevin Gray, Tim and Steve Johnson, and Kalen Tindall. Thank you all

for throwing yourselves into our Middle School Mission Trip last week. And to Erin and Dan Johnson and Jennifer Gray who fed us and led us and made home for us. You made real the Community of Christ to us all.

## **Sources**

“Lebanon loses link to aid; food getting low” by Zeina Karam, Seattle Times, Saturday, August 5, 2006, p.1.

“Living by the Word” by Charles Hoffman, The Christian Century, July 25, 2006, p.18.

“A Prayer to Condoleezza Rice” by Riad Kassis, Christianity Today magazine.

The sermon title came from Bill Moyers’ Baccalaureate Address at Hamilton College, Clinton, New York, May 20, 2006.