

THE RIVER

There is a River.

The River flowed through Eden, where God declared that all of Creation was very good. In that well-watered garden, the world burst with fruitfulness and beauty and diversity and the intimate presence of God.

In the vision of Revelation, the River flows through the city of God, dazzling with pure living water. Beside the river, the tree of life bears fruit for the healing of the nations. The River flows out from the throne of God, who has made an eternal home with God's people.

We were not created into scarcity. Scarcity is not our destiny. We were created to live in the abundance of the River.

We hear this call to abundance in the invitation in Isaiah. Water for all! Nourishment without limit! Not just food, but the richest, most delectable feast, hearty and delicious. A life of fulfillment and satisfaction and security in the promise of God's love.

Now this sounds very beautiful and theological, but what does it mean for our everyday lives? In which there never seems to be enough of anything, especially fulfillment and security?

Someone who has provided a very helpful, practical framework for describing God's plan for this flow of life-giving abundance is the author and consultant Eric Law.

- In his book *Holy Currencies*, Eric describes a “Cycle of Blessings” based on four assumptions:
 1. God owns everything
 2. God gives abundantly
 3. We are not to keep God's resources; we are to circulate these resources.
 4. God's blessings are then recycled to create more blessings.
- We receive God's blessings like water. Life depends not only on water but on the whole dynamic cycle that recirculates water for ongoing renewal and growth around the planet.
- In this framework, abundance does not just mean having a lot of money, or anything else. Living in abundance means continually circulating resources, multiplying their value.
- Eric points out that the word “currency” comes from the Latin word meaning “to flow.” If a resource flows to others in a mutual exchange of value, it has worth. If it does not move, then like water it becomes stagnant.
- While we usually think of “currency” as money, a “holy currency” is anything that can be circulated to contribute to the goodness of life as God intends. Eric identifies other currencies that make up the Cycle of Blessing.

In addition to Money, there are the currencies of Time & Place, Relationship, Truth, Wellness, and Gracious Leadership. We'll explore these further in the Sunday school hour.

- Eric is convinced, from his experience, that “If we share our resources, there will always be enough and all will be well.” (p. 131)

In other words, we will have life in abundance.

But like Adam and Eve, we are sometimes deceived about what God's abundance really means. We develop what has been called a shadow theology. Here are three shadow versions of the River:

1. The River flows *into us*

- Because the River has blessed us, we can come to believe that the purpose of the River is to bless us.
- Recall the myth of Midas. If we have the God-touch, everything will turn to gold.
- Modern version of this mythology is the prosperity gospel: Jesus came to take care of our needs, to fulfill our heart's desires, and to keep us from suffering.
- But: if the River only flows in one direction ... into us and not out again ... it ceases to be the River. It becomes the Dead Sea.
- And if a congregation remains focused inward, it becomes a Midas Church, surrounded by golden blessings but unable to connect meaningfully with anyone outside its circle.
- This is the shadow of *greed*.
- I'm thankful from everything I've seen that this does not describe this congregation!

2. Second shadow version of abundance is the opposite: That the River flows *out of us*

- This is the misunderstanding that WE are the source of the River.
- This can especially affect those who are committed to caring for the needs of others.
- We may be tempted to think that our good deeds demonstrate *our own* glory and goodness – in contrast to what 2 Peter 1:3 says on your bulletins.
- It feels pretty powerful and affirming to be the source of the River .
- But when we start to believe that the blessing of the world depends on us, inevitably we run out of “us” to share. Compassion fatigue sets in.
- We may feel a bit piqued when people are not sufficiently grateful for what we do for them. We may even start wondering if those we help are really worth all our efforts.
- And we resist admitting that we need the River as much as anyone else.
- This is the shadow of *pride*.

3. So we want to avoid thinking that the River flows into us, or that the River flows out of us.

But ... what if the River does not really flow?

- We want to trust that there is a River, that God delights in abundance, but when we look at the world, we see scarcity all around.
- Children who die of starvation in their parent's arms. Villages whose only water source is filled with pollutants and parasites. Wars fought over strips of land. Families moving from shelter to shelter. People's souls turning to dry bones in a desert of loneliness.
- So we don't trust the River. We look at what we have and ask, what if this is all we get? What if giving equals losing?
- So we build walls. We lock gates. We tighten budgets. We close our eyes and our hands.
- This is the shadow of *fear*.

Greed, pride and fear are the thieves that Jesus warned us about in John 10:10 –

The thief approaches with malicious intent, looking to steal, slaughter, and destroy; I came to give life with joy and abundance. (The Voice)

The River flows **from God, through** us, irrigating us with the joyful life of Jesus. The invitation is not to be passive recipients of God's blessings, like an engorged sponge. And it is not to give and give until we are empty. It is to enter God's River so that life can flow to us, and overflow through us, to all of God's beloved human family.

One of the most pathetic characters in the parables of Jesus is the grumpy servant in Matthew 25:14-30.

- When his master entrusted him with money, the servant just buried it in the ground, because he didn't trust himself – or his master.
- And so that servant ended up losing everything he tried to keep safe.
- But the other servants turned the money into currency, by investing their gift and then returning it to their master with interest. And in exchange, the master invited them to share his joy.

So we can trust that we are designed to live in abundance.

- We don't have to worry about whether we have enough resources to carry out God's good intentions. As 2 Peter 1:3 reminds us, we already have *everything needed for life and godliness*.
- But we often need to remind ourselves what that “everything” really includes.
- We get stuck thinking about how little we have in our bank accounts and how much we have on our calendars.
- We need to learn to see and value *all* the assets which God has entrusted to us. Gifts that also include intangibles like relationships, wellness, and gracious leadership.

The reason that we can trust we will have everything we truly need is that the source and the goal of the River is God's faithful presence and unending love.

- We are created to feast on God and have a home in God's presence.
- It is God's love flowing through us that washes away fear, greed and pride.
- It is God's love that delights in communities that are prosperous and healthy and beautiful and safe. So we invest the holy currencies God has entrusted to us to bring these blessings more and more into our lives and the lives of all people.
- The more we drink of God, the more we love as God loves.

Isaiah 55 makes it clear that letting God's River of abundance flow through us is a *choice*.

- It is an invitation to be accepted. Come!
- There is a rhythm of exchange. We acknowledge our thirst and come to God to be nourished, and we overflow with God's life-giving presence. We share with others, we receive from others. We are blessed to be a blessing. We are comforted so that we may comfort others. We are sent out to invest our gifts in the world, and we return to celebrate the glory and goodness of God.
- This is not a one-time decision but a daily choice—an hourly choice.

You know what I think is one of the hardest parts of this rhythm? Being willing to receive when we just want to be the givers.

- Keep in mind, God's abundance does not mean never being in need. It does not mean having so much that we are insulated from risk and want.
- It means that we are part of a gracious current that connects our need with the provision of others, and our gifts and talents with the needs of others. It means that even our inadequacies and our suffering can be brought into community with others for mutual good.
- So as God's River flows through the mission of the church, we are always asking, "How might God have designed this person that I am helping be a blessing to others? What do these folks outside our congregation have to offer that our congregation needs? What is the life-giving dream we share that we can work on together?"

Let me share one brief example of what this looks like.

- Eli, a teenage boy, had a friend named Daniel who was growing up without a father. His home life was very difficult, with abuse and drugs all around. Eli's parents began mentoring Daniel, and when his home life became unbearable, invited him to live with their family. They provided for Daniel, poured into him their gifts of time and relationship, and nurtured his potential.
- Daniel made some mistakes along the way but he grew up with a very different life than the destructive path of his youth. He married and started a family. Then someone at church asked him and his wife, "If you could do anything, what would you be doing?"
- That question awoke a dream in both of them to provide housing and support for single moms. They began building a network and support to launch the Restoration House in Knoxville, TN.
- In the past decade, the River has been flowing through Daniel and Mandy Watson to provide over 40 single parent families with housing, supportive friendships, budgeting and life skills, and enrichment activities for their kids. And the families build a sense of community in which they look out for one another and cheer one another on toward their dreams.

There is a River. It flows through people like the Watsons, and it flows through Lorraine Avenue Mennonite Church. I pray that you keep wading into the current of God's abundance.

As Ezekiel 47:9 promises, "Where the River flows, everything will live." It's exciting to imagine all the ways that this flowing abundance will water the life of the world and multiply your joy.

BENEDICTION

Jesus says, "If any of you is thirsty, come to Me and drink. If you believe in Me, rivers of living water will flow from within you." (John 7:37-38)

May you choose the River. May you continue to drink deeply from God's faithful presence and unending love. May the living waters of hope and healing flow through you into all the lives you touch.

Heidi Unruh, October 30, 2016