Abundance: A Stewardship Campaign for Pandemic Times

It pretty much goes without saying that everything about our shared lives have changed because of COVID-19. Back in March the church experienced one of the biggest, miraculous, whole-scale changes in many decades in the span of just a few weeks. From in-person to online, from bulletins to PDFs, from fellowship halls to Facebook live – it seems that the Holy Spirit gave the church a two-handed shove off a proverbial cliff and the church flew.

Seemingly overnight worship leaders, deacons, pastors, and congregation councils became experienced online moderators, video editors, sound mixers, and technical gurus. In the field of stewardship, congregations who weren’t already on the digital-giving bandwagon added apps, buttons, and widgets to websites in order to reach members who were accustomed to giving cash or check in an offering plate. And now, seven months in to the pandemic we all hoped would be over already, we are facing what is for many congregations the annual stewardship campaign season. As I mentioned in this blog post, stewardship this year will likely look a little different, but by focusing on God’s abundance and who God is calling the church to be today, we can continue to share the gospel, invite members to be generous, and so living as faithful disciples continue to proclaim hope to our world.

This stewardship material is centered on four aspects of God’s abundance, and I have written it so that the themes have connections to the Revised Common Lectionary beginning the week of October 18. I have formatted the material in such a way that if your community of faith wants to use this material on a different timeline it can also stand alone. I also hope that it if your community experiences a different aspect of God’s abundance you can easily substitute your own. The four aspects are:

- Abundant thanks
- Abundant freedom
- Abundant hope
- Abundant life

Again, the format here is intended to be flexible so that you can either use the material as-is or you can customize aspects, take an idea and make it your own, and insert stories from your own community so that it speaks to who you are as God’s people, right where you are.

You are not alone in this season of being church, of listening and moving and innovating. We are #inthistogther and it is our prayer that throughout this season you continue to live in and experience God’s abundance, however it manifests in you.

Peace,

Pastor Erika Utke
Director for Evangelical Mission and Assistant to the Bishop
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Week 1: Abundant Thanks

We always give thanks to God for all of you and mention you in our prayers, constantly remembering before our God and Father your work of faith and labor of love and steadfastness of hope in our Lord Jesus Christ. ~ 1 Thessalonians 1.2-3

Theologian and professor Diana Butler Bass states, “Gratefulness is not a magic fix, but it just might be the bright star directing us to a new and better place.”¹ I believe that all stewardship begins with gratitude—giving thanks for what God has so abundantly lavished upon us, we steward these gifts entrusted to our care for the good of all creation. When we begin to think about personal and communal stewardship, what better place to begin than by giving thanks?

Particularly in these days of pandemic when loss and grief are part of every day, it is ever more important to remain grounded in gratitude. Our communion liturgy says as much, “It is indeed right, our duty and our joy, that we should at all times and in all places give thanks and praise to you, O God...”² Starting from a posture of gratitude literally changes your brain and enables you to look at the world differently, again providing benefits when it is all too easy to see the negative impacts of a global pandemic on psycho-social health.

As you think about this week in a stewardship campaign, it might be a good time to create a Thanksgiving Reel. You could invite members to send in pictures of them saying one word in answer to the question: For what do you give thanks? You could put together pictures of staff, ministry, or other aspects of communal life for which you are all thankful. You could have a member talk about how gratitude for God’s gifts has impacted their own life—perhaps a story about the gifts they have received by being part of your faith community. If you have a platform for worship that allows people to comment during the service, you could prompt anyone watching to type something they’re thankful for in the comments and just watch as the gratitude rolls in. You could even use brain science and challenge members to start or end each day by writing down a gratitude—in just four weeks their brains could be changed!

However it works out, the focus this week is on giving thanks. Giving thanks for all God has given us and inviting others to take stock of how God has abundantly provided in our lives gives a steady foundation for the next three weeks (and beyond).

Lectionary connection:
- Sunday, October 18/Lectionary 29A
  1 Thessalonians 1.1-10

² Evangelical Lutheran Worship. Augsburg Fortress: Minneapolis, MN. 2006. p. 108
³ https://greatergood.berkeley.edu/article/item/how_gratitude_changes_you_and_your_brain
Connected songs:

- ELW 310 – Songs of Thankfulness and Praise
- ELW 822 – Oh, Sing to the Lord
- W&P 41 – Give Thanks

Week 2: Abundant Freedom

Jesus said to the Jews who had believed in him,
“If you continue in my word, you are truly my disciples; and you will know the truth, and the truth will make you free.” ~ John 8.31-32

In Martin Luther’s 1520 Treatise on the Freedom of a Christian he lays out two, seemingly contradictory statements, “A Christian is a perfectly free lord of all, subject to none. A Christian is a perfectly dutiful servant of all, subject to all.” Particularly on Reformation Sunday this statement sums up what it is to live as a disciple of Christ. Yes – we are free to live as we wish, after all, we are freely forgiven in the grace and love of Jesus Christ. But as the apostle Paul reminds us in Romans 6.15-16, this freedom is not a license to live however we wish, disregarding others and the world around us. This freedom, best practiced, becomes the joyful willingness to love God and love neighbor. It is as the Christ hymn in Philippians 2 describes as a self-emptying, a humility and willingness to serve.

If the pandemic has done anything in our world, it has provided ample opportunities to serve. Neighbors serving neighbors by grocery shopping and watching out for more vulnerable individuals. Parents serving children by jumping into childcare, educational, and recreational roles, sometimes in addition to working full-time.

Congregations serving neighbors through food and economic assistance. Christians serving black and brown siblings by proclaiming that #blacklivesmatter and resisting the sin of racism and white supremacy.

As you think about this week in a stewardship campaign, it is a week to highlight how God has set your community free to be the church. This will look different in every congregation and it is a week to celebrate how God has equipped your congregation to serve – feeding ministries, ministries of grace and spiritual nourishment (worship), partnerships with area organizations, synod, and churchwide work. It might be fun to ask members how they have been called to serve during the pandemic – not necessarily a ministry in the building (because – it’s COVID and virtually nothing is happening in the building), but how members are serving day-to-day. You can highlight a video of a member telling their ‘serving story’, invite members to send in a picture of how they serve in daily life (parents helping kids, socially-distanced chatting with neighbors).

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4 Videos of churchwide ministries can be downloaded for use from: https://www.elca.org/sofia#Videos
planting a tree or picking up litter, pictures of donations for a food pantry, the logo of a local partner, etc.), or show one of the videos from our churchwide partners.

Whatever this week produces, the focus is on the freedom to serve. Having been freely forgiven by God’s amazing grace, we faithfully respond by freely serving our neighbors.

Lectionary connection:
- Sunday, October 25/Reformation Sunday A
  John 8.31-35, Romans 3.19-28

Connected songs:
- ELW 576 – We All Are One in Mission
- ELW358 – Great God, Your Love Has Called Us
- W&P 89 – Lord, Be Glorified

Week 3: Abundant Hope

Why are you so full of heaviness, O my soul,
and why are you so disquieted within me?
Put your trust in God, for I will yet give thanks
to the one who is my help and my God. ~ Psalm 43.5

Hope ... in what cannot be seen in what is not yet real.
Hope ... that this too shall pass, some day.
BUT, until that day, I do what I can do. I act in what I know.
And I trust that God’s love shown in Christ will shine on me, will shine on my path.
Gracious God, I just need light for one step— and that’s my next step.5

This beautiful poem about hope comes from a resource from the ELCA, written since the start of quarantine. In a pandemic world searching for hope, the church has a unique opportunity to boldly and loudly proclaim hope into so much despair. The words of the psalmist echo in my own soul, particularly as I watch the news and see a nation divided, the myriad impacts of a global pandemic including a mental health crisis, job loss, financial and food insecurity, and deepening polarization.

Hope is the language of faith. It believes when facing the unbelievable. It provides comfort when none is evident. It looks at a sealed tomb and laughs. In the words of Rev. Phil Hirsch, Executive Director for Domestic Mission in the ELCA, Jesus Christ is the light of the world and the hope of a broken humanity. This, siblings in Christ, is what the

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5 www.elca.org/Resiliency Copyright © 2020 Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
church is called to proclaim. It is what we are called to live and who we are called to be and when we can’t be hope for the world, we point to the One who never fails.

In the midst of a stewardship campaign the focus this week is on the abundant hope we have in the life, death, and resurrection of Jesus Christ. As people of faith this is our witness to the world and to each other. Telling the stories of hope we have is the best stewardship of this hope, and brings hope to others. You might consider inviting a particular member who can articulate how God has given hope through the ministry and work of your congregation. A video story, a montage of moments of hope – joy, love, ministry at life passages like baptism, weddings, and funerals – a creative series of pictures with individuals holding a poster with the word ‘hope’ and then a final one with the mission statement of your congregation.

However stories of hope are told in your community of faith – now is the time to shout them from the rooftops. And whatever that looks like, we focus on how we steward the stories of God’s hope. Out of God’s abundant gifts, we give thanks, freely serve, and then tell the stories of hope we have in Christ Jesus.

Lectionary connection:
- Sunday, November 1/Lectionary 31A
  Psalm 43

Connected songs:
- ELW 597 – My Hope Is Built on Nothing Less
- ELW ELW 726 – Light Dawns on a Weary World
- W&P 17 – Beauty for Brokenness

Week 4: Abundant Life

* Keep awake therefore, for you know neither the day nor the hour. ~ Matthew 25.13 *

This final week gets to the crux of the stewardship campaign: God, in Christ Jesus, abundantly and lavishly brings life to us, surprising us sometimes when we least expect. Like the women who arrive to an empty tomb, or the child delighted by the first spent dandelion of the season, God’s abundant life can so easily sneak up we might miss it. In the parable assigned for Sunday, November 8 we find a late groom, bridesmaids of varying capacity to plan ahead, and a wedding banquet with a shut door. At first glance, this seems the opposite of abundant: not all the bridesmaids arrive at the banquet, the door is shut and the bridegroom turns them away. This certainly seems more like scarce life, or life only for the prepared.

Yet the gift in this story about abundant life comes precisely because God arrives at any time. At all times – for those who are ready. We have an invitation in this parable, I think, to simply anticipate. To wait for the coming of the Lord, to receive God’s invitation to thankful lives of freedom and hope. This invitation comes again and again
– in water, in bread, in wine, in forgiveness and in each other. God comes to us and offers abundant life.

In the context of this stewardship campaign, this week is all about inviting others to share in God’s abundant life. We celebrate all the ways that God has invited us into this abundant banquet and invite others to consider what it would look like to support the ministry of sharing this abundant life with the world. We name the ways God’s presence has surprised or blessed us in and through the shared ministry of the faith community. We remind people that God often surprises us through each other and that every person’s presence matters. In response to these abundant surprises of life and grace we offer our gifts of passion, skill, time, and yes, of course money, to join in beautiful, life-filled community. As you think about how you might invite others to share in this abundant life and offer their own lives, you might consider inviting members to talk about why they financially support your congregation. You might invite someone who has experienced God’s abundant life in worship or through a congregational ministry to talk about how this life has impacted them, and to have a congregational leader invite others to financially support this life-giving ministry.

Whether you mail pledge cards ahead of time, or whether you invite members into a time of prayer during the service and follow-up later, the emphasis is always on the gift of life we have in Christ Jesus, and how, through the Holy Spirit this life flows out of our own lives and shared ministry to make a difference in the world.

However this invitation plays out in your community, we always give thanks. We live in God’s freedom to respond faithfully. We share our hope. And we offer our gifts.

Lectionary connection:
- Sunday, November 8/Lectionary 32A
  Matthew 25.1-13

Connected songs:
- ELW 763 – My Life Flows On in Endless Song
- ELW 779 – Amazing Grace
- W&P 100 – Name Above All Names

Additional Resources
Additional resources, including articles, tips, and videos that highlight stories from our shared ministry in the ELCA, can be found at these links:

Southeastern Iowa Synod
Evangelical Lutheran Church in America
God’s work. Our hands.

https://faithlead.luthersem.edu/resources/stewardship-101/

https://www.elca.org/sofia#Videos

Southeastern Iowa Synod Specific videos:
https://vimeo.com/336913089
https://vimeo.com/273681746