

“ABUNDANT CARE FOR EACH OTHER”

**A Sermon Preached at
FIRST UNITED PRESBYTERIAN CHURCH**

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By The Rev Rob Dyer

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(transcribed from audio file)

The scripture today comes from the New Testament. It is 2 Corinthians 1:3-5.

Blessed be God, even the Father of our Lord Jesus Christ, the Father of mercies, and the God of all comfort;

Who comforteth us in all our tribulation, that we may be able to comfort them which are in any trouble, by the comfort wherewith we ourselves are comforted of God.

For as the sufferings of Christ abound in us, so our consolation also aboundeth by Christ. NRSV

This is the Word of the Lord. Thanks be to God.

Today I wanted to give you a very personal witness to the receipt and experience of God's abundance. So, the first thing I tried to think of was, what is a place in my life where I experienced incredible abundance? And the first thing that popped into my mind was the all-you-can-eat Chinese buffet.

I mean, I don't know what happens to me as a human being when I walk into an all-you-can-eat Chinese buffet, but I change. I go in there with the attitude of like, well I'll have a lot of variety, and I can have just a little bit of a lot of things. And what's the first thing I do? I get a plate and I build this sort of Tower of Babylon, up toward the heavens on my plate. It starts with a good base of the sushi, because that's solid and will hold things. Then you gotta think about how you're going to stack things on top of it and how it's not going to mess up the flavor of the thing that is underneath it. It's like you build that first plate like you're afraid at any moment they're going to go "That's it! We're shutting it down! You can't go back!"

So, you build that first giant plate. You bring it back and you eat all of that and then you think to yourself, well it's an all-you-can-eat buffet. I paid for this. I should get a bit more. And so, you do. You come back with another plate that's way too full, but there's just such an abundance.

Then you finish that, and you think, you know I didn't try anything from that third row of food yet. Let's just try a few things. It's that last little nibble plate you get. That last little you know, you don't fill it. You're exercising a little bit of self-control. You're starting to get really full, and then you realize – there's dessert. I haven't had any of that yet. And you tell yourself, with all the intentions of the blessings of the world, you are just going to get 6 or 7 things and just take one bite of each. And that's another lie. Because you end up eating 2 or 3 of them all the way through. And you have to because that's what you do at an all-you-can-eat buffet.

Today's passage is Paul trying to talk to the Corinthians about, and us today, what do we do with the abundance of grace that God has for us. For the abundance of comfort and consolation and blessings that God has for us. It seems though, rather than taking the all-you-can-eat buffet approach, we don't fully take it in. Sometimes we even hold back the plate it seems, not realizing all that has been poured out for us and the consolations that have come along the way.

The passage today talks about how God has this abundance of consolation for us, of grace and mercy and much of it we just let go right by without notice. We take for granted and we wait for the thing we don't have in the moment and notice that. And we know, as people who are of the church faith, who have lived lives of faith, we know that God doesn't just wipe away all the bad stuff. We know that what happens is that God is there to walk with us and give us consolation and grace and blessings in the midst of those dark valleys. It's not a wiping away of it, but it means that there is always a dark valley that has a light in it. A light that God brings into it for us and you've experienced some of those. I'm sure you have.

What you find is that God is a source of comfort, but our comfort isn't given to us to become comfortable. Our comfort is given to us so that we might be comforters. We are given comfort so that we might have that to give to someone else. This abundance of care and blessing and forgiveness, we're not the end point of it. The whole point is that what we receive, that we have that to give somewhere else.

When I think of times in my life when I have had to count on the blessings of God to meet me in a dark valley, in a place that felt really broken and that might break me, there are a couple of things that come to mind. I'm sure if you were asked to reflect upon your own life, many of you have those moments where you feel like you are broken; or you are right on that precipice of falling into a hole that you're not sure you could ever get out of, and then something happens. Something which maybe you gave the name of God to, or something that just happened by the grace

of God and you didn't even recognize it, but some blessing comes along and pulls you back from that precipice, or meets you down in that dark pit and is there with you.

I remember when my dad left us. I remember the night that he left. I remember holding on to his arm and putting the full weight of my body on it. And I remember begging him not to go and I remember him telling me that he couldn't. And he walked out. And I thought that I wouldn't come back from that. It just felt like such a broken moment.

But what happened in the midst of that, wasn't that it all got wiped away, but instead there were so many people on the journey that met me where I was. My own mother. My own grandparents. The church family that we were a part of; that made sure we got invites to come over and have dinner at their house, or to help us so we could go camping with the group for years after that, even when we didn't have the help of my dad any more around. And just to be surrounded by such a great witness of God's love. It came in the form of people. Whatever the work of the Spirit, I didn't recognize it when I was at that age. I can look back now and recognize it, but at that age it just felt like the people of God were there for us again and again and again.

One of those very special people was my grandfather – Grandpa Earl. He stepped in and he was such a support and a guide to me through those years and in my teenage years. And he did little things, like this is going to seem like nothing to you, but this is so big to me. When I was trying out for the junior high basketball team that man stood out there in the driveway and fed me that basketball, trying to get that darn left-handed layup to work. And he kept doing it and doing it, feeding me that ball until it got so dark we could barely see the basket. And I know, I know his legs were burning out there because he had circulatory problems and for him to stand that long out there and do that, I know that caused him a great deal of physical pain, but that man stayed out there and fed that stupid ball to that junior high kid again and again and again. In that love, in that comfort that I received I learned something that I could then take in comforting others. It didn't just stop and end on me, it landed in my soul, and I believe that God cared for me through that amazing man.

And when I started college and came back on break and he had a stroke and he was in the hospital and I remember visiting with him and I remember telling him, "All right you gotta get out of that bed. I need to work on my layups." And in a moment he looked around the room to make sure no one else was looking and he just looked at me and he shook his head, no, because he knew what was happening to his body.

He died the next day. But that night before I remember thinking, don't you dare die on me. I need you here.

I didn't get my prayers answered the way I wanted, but what happened in the midst of his passing away, in a moment when I probably should have crumbled, what happened instead was, and this I will give to the spirit of God, something happened inside of me. I had a strength I didn't know I had. I knew what he would have done in this situation, cause he was the rock in our family. Check on mom. Check on grandma. Make sure we get the arrangements for the funeral service. We get everything set, everything settled. Take care of business. Get things done. And there was some kind of strength that came into me that I did not have before that night and that was the Spirit of God working in me. I believe that with my whole heart.

And again, God surrounded us with people because we put ourselves in a community of faith. We put ourselves around a great cloud of witnesses so that when those dark valleys come, we wouldn't be standing there alone, we are surrounded by the amazing wonderful loving people who would care for us through that, and walk through it with us.

And out of all those moments of things getting broken, I remember coming out of that season of my life and thinking, I can't wait until I get to be a dad. I want to take what has come out of those experiences and I want that. Now that's not a calling for everyone, this is my witness. This is my calling that I felt like I had, and I just wanted to be a dad so bad.

Logan, I think about you up here with those girls and I just started getting choked up. What that must have felt like in the moment for you and I just wanted that so bad.

And when after much difficulty my wife became pregnant and then we lost that child in miscarriage, that should have been a huge breaking moment for me in that stage of my life, but again I recognized that something in the Spirit of God, moved and not just a stirring in me, but in my wife, in my family, my mother and the people of the church community. We had the church community back home, here. Yes. But also where we lived on the east coast there was a church community there as well and there were just people who loved us and were willing to weep with us.

It's not that the afflictions get wiped away by this Spirit of God, it's that in each of those afflictions there is an abundance of God's grace to love you through it. And

when we put ourselves in communities of faith, there is an abundance of God's love to care for us if we just engage in it. That is not a time to hold back your plate. It's a time to hold it out and say, God fill it up. Fill it up in a ridiculous manner and I believe God does that.

I know that God has done that through the gift of Jesus Christ, who gives me grace that I am free from any fear of death or sin. That I am given forgiveness and grace, but beyond that in the very days, along the journey there, there is the opportunity for grace and you each get an opportunity to be a part of that for someone else. And that comfort and your own stories, cause you have your own, your own stories of when you have felt broken, on the edge, on that precipice, where you were about ready to fall into that pit and something in the Spirit of God moved and someone within the body of Christ moved and you felt that love and that grace and that abundant care. It taught you something and it didn't just make you comfortable, it made you able to be a comforter to others.

You can take that pain. You can take that moment of brokenness that you have experienced and then use that because I know there have been moments in my time as a pastor where I have walked into a very dark place. I have been in situations where it did not feel safe because of the characters involved in the situation, but there is something that has worked in my life to give me a confidence that I will have the care and comfort of Christ with me. Look, I might lose my life, or I might lose a lot of my possessions, or my reputation, or my security or whatever, but I will not lose the comfort of Christ. It is so abundant it covers everything. And my ability to be a comforter in this world is fueled by that and so can yours be fueled.

You know, later in this very same chapter to the Corinthians, Paul said, all that I am able to do, the holy and godly behavior, it's not because of my wisdom, it's because of the grace of God that works through me and in me and that has worked on Paul. We are not able to do great things because we are great. We are able to do great things because we've been loved that much.

The abundance of care that you have received does not end with you. And so when you are with someone and they are in one of those places, those dark places, or they're on that precipice, you bring them to the all-you-can-eat buffet of God's grace. You show them that there is a space where their plate can be filled with love and care and attention and you do what you can to make this space so evident of that as well. You work together so that those who come here broken with plates empty that they feel the fullness of God's grace and mercy. And by doing that we fulfil the calling

that Christ has for us, that Paul reminded the Corinthians and I am reminding you today.

Out of your darkness comes an opportunity to stand in dark places with others. Do not let go of your connection with Christ for it will empower you in those days and for others in those days. May God be blessed with the witness that you bring.

Halleluiah and Amen.