

"The Myth of Scarcity"

Matthew 14:13-21

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The Rev. Dr. David A. Van Dyke
The House of Hope Presbyterian Church
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The text begins, "When Jesus heard this he withdrew from there in a boat to deserted place by himself." And what did he hear that made him do that? Jesus had just learned that John the Baptist had been killed. John was being held in Herod's prison because of his prophetic preaching. That, and he kept calling out Herod for having an affair with his brother's wife, Herodias.

John was beheaded and his head was presented on a silver tray to the daughter of Herodias who had just performed a very pleasing, exotic dance at a lavish birthday party Herod was throwing for himself—a party symbolizing the very worst kind of excess, debauchery and consumerism—where life is so easily disregarded.

That was the news Jesus heard that made him want to retreat to a deserted place in order to be alone. But of course he can't really get away. The crowd followed him so that when he went ashore, the crowd was there, waiting for him. That sad and confused crowd which had, by then, no doubt also heard the news about John. There they were, waiting for Jesus, looking to Jesus...needing Jesus.

And Jesus had compassion on them and began healing the sick among them. But the hour was getting late and it was a deserted place. And there were so many people who had come. It must have made the disciples nervous, afraid even.

So the disciples tell Jesus, "We need to send these people away so they can go buy food for themselves." But Jesus said, "We need not send them away, you give them something to eat."
"But we can't. We only have five loaves and two fish. We just can't. We don't have enough."

And there it is—the language of scarcity. The perception of limits. The acceptance of defeat. The slow, sad death of imagination.

But the language of scarcity doesn't automatically present itself as negativity. No, it often presents itself as the voice of practicality and reason. Common sense, even. The belief in scarcity even masks itself at times as good stewardship, in that we need to be very careful and cautious with what precious few resources we have.

And the notion of scarcity, of running out or of not having enough, strikes fear in even the most comfortable. The fear of not having enough money always appears near the top of list when people are asked to name their fears.

I'm not sure how else you can explain the survey results that consistently show that the higher one's net worth the less of a percentage of it they are willing to give away, compared to the charitable giving of people with net worths much smaller. You'd think it would be just the opposite. It should be the opposite. It's the power the myth of scarcity has over us.

There is an old joke preachers sometimes haul out during stewardship and capital campaigns. I have good news and bad news. The good news is that we have more money than we need to reach our goal and

accomplish what we want to accomplish. The bad news is that it's still in your pockets! We chuckle because we know it's true.

Robert Wuthnow is a sociologist from Princeton who has studied stewardship in the life of churches. He found that by and large, ministers do a good job talking about stewardship and giving. They study it and understand it. It's just that people don't get it. People with good intentions have bought into the prevailing tide of consumerism where there is never enough and we always need more. I'm not sure there's a greater threat to our humanity than rampant, unchecked consumerism.

In 1999, Old Testament scholar Walter Brueggemann, wrote a powerful and challenging article in *The Christian Century* entitled, *The Liturgy of Abundance, the Myth of Scarcity*. In the article, Brueggemann says that in the beginning, way back at Genesis 1, God affirms what he calls the liturgy of abundance and generosity in the creation. Over and over again God keeps affirming the created order as good. It is even very good.

This is further affirmed in places like Psalm 104 where the abundance within creation is celebrated and anxiety is rejected. But he notes that something changed in 47th chapter in Genesis. Pharaoh had a dream that there was going to be a famine in the land and so he went and began gathering up and hoarding food. And with that, the notion of scarcity, which hadn't been there before, gets introduced.

Brueggemann says this,

The [great] conflict between the narratives of abundance and of scarcity is the defining problem confronting us. The gospel story of abundance asserts that we originated in the magnificent, inexplicable love of a God who loved the world into generous being. And the story of abundance says that our lives will end in God, and that this well-being cannot be taken from us.

While it's easy to blame scarcity as the issue, the reality is we make choices all the time about how we are going to allocate our resources. As a child, I would often go with my father on Sundays after church while he made his rounds at the hospital. He was a physician and I would either sit in the waiting room while he saw patients, ride the elevators or explore various parts of the hospital.

But I remember pulling into the doctor's parking lot and seeing the cars the other doctors drove. Porsches and Lincolns, Mercedes and Land Rovers. And as my father would park his rather sensible Buick, the kind of car his father had always driven, I'd say, "Dad, how come you don't drive a Porsche?" His answer was always the same. "Because I don't want to drive a Porsche. If you want to drive a Porsche one day, go ahead."

It was never about his not being able to afford the Porsche, it was a choice he made not to spend that kind of money on a car. And we make those kinds of choices all the time. We make them for ourselves every time we spend our money, and we make them as a nation in the budget priorities we set. It's the myth that there is a scarcity of money, in the richest country on the planet, that causes things like universal healthcare to be so controversial—something many other countries have figured out.

And it isn't really a lack of resources that makes social programs that help the most vulnerable and at risk people in our society so unpopular and always under attack. It's the lack of will to make those things priorities driven by the fear that there just isn't enough to go around. There isn't enough for everyone to share in the pie. The myth of scarcity makes us think small and often results in us being mean to our neighbors.

And notice, please, that when Jesus ordered the disciples to feed the crowd it's simply because they are hungry. There's nothing said about whether or not they are deserving or have earned the right to eat. The clear injunction in this is that if people are hungry, the solution isn't wishing they'd just go away. No, they need to be fed. In God's abundant world, scarcity is a myth; our misguided priorities unfortunately, are not.

So Jesus says to the disciples, "We need not send them away, you give them something to eat." So they brought him what they had, five loaves and two fish. And Jesus took it, looked up toward heaven, blessed and then broke the loaves and gave it to the disciples to distribute to the hungry crowd. And somehow, not only was there enough to feed everyone, there was an abundance. All ate and were satisfied and there were still twelve baskets full of leftovers when all was said and done.

Now, we could deconstruct this miracle and perhaps explain it metaphorically in ways that make sense for modern, thinking people like us to understand what happened there that day. We could do that but I don't think it's the way we should approach this narrative. In fact to deconstruct it in that way would be to feed right into the myth of scarcity.

The point here is that in God's generous world, this is always an abundance. An abundance of love, grace and blessing. And I think in our heart of hearts we know that to be true. I think we know that the narrative of scarcity is really the story of death. That becoming enslaved to a crass consumerism that tells us there isn't enough and that we always need to have more, is a sure way to be miserable in life.

God's abundance transcends the market economy. It exceeds any bottom line we create. Like the manna from heaven God provided the people of Israel, the bread being offered to us is the bread of life which when broken and shared, demonstrates that there is more than enough for everyone.

Amen.