

Wesley United Methodist Church      Rev. Beverly E Stenmark  
July 29, 2018  
Title: Abundance Out of Scarcity  
Scripture: Ephesians 3:14-21  
John 6:1-21

I sometimes think that today's scripture should be the theme story for United Methodists. It is often a joke that the third sacrament for United Methodists is the church dinner – whether it be pot luck or a prepared meal. When we gather we like to eat and we almost always have left overs. Of course, I've never known our left overs to be more than we started with, but that was the case in today's gospel. A meal that started with 5 small barley loaves and 2 small fish, fed about 5,000 men plus women and children, and ended with 12 baskets of left overs.

The crowd kept following Jesus because they saw how we had been healing the sick. Jesus was always focused on the total person. He cared about their physical health, as well as their mental, emotional, and spiritual health. So, when he saw the large crowd that followed him, he asked Philip where they could buy enough bread to feed such a large crowd.

Philip, ever the practical man, was overcome by the enormity of the task. "Six months wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." Think for just a second about how much food you could buy with six months wages and you have a sense of the size of the crowd. Indeed, we later learn that there were about 5,000 in all. The other gospels, telling about this, expand upon that to say, 5,000 men plus women and children. So, we are talking a very large crowd.

Philip's answer was realistic, though ultimately unhelpful.

Linda, not to put you on the spot, but with all the dinners you have organized, can you imagine suddenly being asked to feed somewhere in

excess of 5,000 people? Of course not. For any of us, this would take a major amount of planning, huge kitchens, and massive supplies and the very thought of it could simply be paralyzing. John tells us that Jesus asked this question as a test, because he already knew what he was going to do.

Imagine Jesus posing a similar kind of test to us today. How would we respond to such a seemingly impossible question?

Andrew, steps forward with a creative solution that seems to be ridiculous and woefully insignificant. “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?” There simply was no way to provide food for so many people. It was impossible.

Jesus gives instructions for the people to be seated. One of the commentators I read this week, pointed out that the Greek word here is to “recline or lie down” not simply “sit”. He said this was important because it is the word used to describe how the rich and royal ate, reclining or lying down. Jesus is treating the crowd as royalty. They reclined on a “great deal of grass” in a way that seems to echo the 23<sup>rd</sup> psalm, “He makes me lie down in green pastures.”<sup>i</sup>

John Pavlovitz, a contemporary writer, points out that Jesus prepared a meal for the multitudes to remind us that we feed people not because we believe they deserve it, but because they are hungry.<sup>ii</sup> Jesus treated the crowd like royalty and prepared to feed them. This was not just a social handout but rather it was a revelation of amazing grace.

Jesus took the five barley loaves – think of small rolls, not large loaves of bread. Jesus took the bread, gave thanks and began distributing them to the crowd. After everyone had eaten all that they wanted, Jesus

told the disciples to gather up what was left. They filled twelve baskets with the leftovers.

This is a far cry from Philip's lament that six months wages would not provide enough for everyone to have even a little. Rather this large crowd ate their fill and there were still twelve baskets of food left over.

A colleague who came from the same kind of culture as Jesus did, told about taking a several hour trip by train. He had his lunch packed and safely stowed above his seat. As the day wore on, he became hungry and was eager to eat his prepared meal. However, as he explained, in his culture, one would never consider eating in front of other people without sharing what he had. He waited as long as he could, and finally decided that sharing his small lunch with the three other people in his cabin was preferable to sitting there and getting hungrier.

He finally took out his bag and opened it. As soon as he did so, and began to unwrap his food, the other three people stood up and did the same thing. Apparently, they had all been struggling with the same dilemma – go hungry or share what little they had brought and at least have a little bit to eat.

A common interpretation of this miracle is that this is exactly what happened. When the boy shared what he had brought, and Jesus started to distribute the food, others reached into their pockets and took out what they had brought as well.

In this ancient agrarian economy many people lived at just barely a subsistence level. They lived from day to day and many days they went hungry. If people did share what they had brought with them, there were still likely large numbers who had brought nothing with them. We can be sure that on this day, everyone there had the opportunity to have a full

stomach, to eat as much as they wanted, and still they filled twelve baskets with the left overs.

Whether the multiplication of food was from only the five barley loaves and two fish, or whether it was from the sharing of a large crowd of people, those who enjoyed the simple but ample meal provided by Jesus recognized that something astounding had happened. This unusual experience of plenty for everyone was enough for them to want to make Jesus their king.

Whether this was supernatural or magical multiplication or an amazing sharing among people, this is really about the relationship between people and God. At least part of the miracle is Jesus' ability to move people out of their selfishness inspiring them to nourish each other. Think of that boy, and his willingness to come forward and offer what little he had. God transforms our inadequacies into abundance when we care for each other.<sup>iii</sup>

This is a witness of the way that God is able to bring abundance out of scarcity; how God is able to do far more than we can begin to imagine.

The way in which we use our gifts matters. The feeding of the crowd occurred because at least one person in the crowd and maybe more shared their gifts. Even though what they had seemed meager, the gifts when given to God were more than enough to feed the entire community. This is the way it always is when we use our gifts in the service of God and God's creation.

Even in the face of insurmountable challenges, God only requires us to be faithful, obedient, and willing to take a risk.

It is so easy for us to buy into a myth of scarcity – to believe that there is not enough to go around. When we believe this, then we continue

in such a way that the rich stay rich and the poor stay poor. The gap between the rich and the poor in the United States is now worse than it was during the Great Depression. It is easy to believe that resources are scarce unless we have a sense of justice and unless we see budgets and economies as moral discourse.<sup>iv</sup>

But God has always operated out of abundance – not scarcity. All of creation is a mirror into God’s capacity for generosity. I love to sit or walk by the ocean and watch and hear the crashing waves. At those times, I am overwhelmed by the majesty and greatness of God’s creation. Then I remember that those waves are still crashing against the rocks in the middle of the night when no one is there to see them and marvel at their greatness.

The State of Maine where I recently lived for 8 years is about 90% forested land. This includes about 12 million acres in Northern Maine where very few people live. Even in this place where people never see it there are lakes, trees, and gorgeous scenery. Our creation bears witness to the abundance with which God has always operated.

When one boy was willing to give his five barley loaves and two fish, God was able to use this to feed well over 5,000 people. When we are able to abandon the myth of scarcity, God is able to do great things with the gifts we bring.

Christian tradition has at its center the reality that the way we live our lives in relation to God is inseparable from how we live with our neighbors. Paul reminds us of this in his letter to the Ephesians. He is celebrating because he has come to understand that God’s family includes not only the Jews but also the Gentiles – us. His prayer for us is that we will be taken

over by Christ. That we will be strengthened from the inside out by the power of God's Spirit – that we will have Christ dwelling in our hearts.

When I was in college I remember having a small booklet called, "My Heart, Christ's Home." I was reminded of this when one of the commentators this week noted that having Christ dwell in our hearts is like having a new person move into our home.<sup>v</sup> Think about the changes that take place over time, when someone moves into your house, or comes to stay for a long time.

This pamphlet was a parable about having Jesus come to visit and stay at your home. At first, you would make sure that the living room was clean and orderly. You might stay home for a few days to entertain Jesus but eventually you might want to go back to your normal routine and leave Jesus at home to entertain himself.

In the booklet, he wanders from room to room and offers to clean up some of the messy places. Eventually, you discover that it is too difficult to take care of the whole house and keep it up to a standard that you think you need for Jesus to be there. One day you come home to find Jesus standing in front of a closet and pointing at it, asking what is inside that smells so bad. Finally, you confess that there is stuff in there that you don't want to look at because it is too horrible, and you don't want Jesus to know about it.

Jesus offers to take over the care of entire house. The closet gets cleaned out and starts to smell good again, and you are amazed at what Jesus is able to do.

Paul reminds us that when Christ dwells in our hearts then we will be rooted and grounded in love, and will begin to understand the "breadth and

length and height and depth” of the love of Christ and we may then be filled with all that is of God.

He closes by praying, “Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine, to him be glory in the church and in Christ Jesus to all generations, forever and ever. Amen.”

This is the abundance that God is able to do out of the scarcity that we bring. Just as Jesus asked Philip how they were going to buy enough bread to feed the crowd, Jesus asks us today. Jesus asks our Trustees, our Education, our Outreach, our Church Council, all of us how we are going to respond to the needs around us.

The focus of our ministry is not simply what good people decide is reasonable to undertake in order to meet basic needs. Rather ministry is really about multiplying our resources so that what might in other circumstances be a social handout, can become a revelation of amazing grace.

The feeding of the multitude addresses the temptation that we might have to shrug our shoulders in the face of human need. After Hurricanes like Katrina, tsunamis, earthquakes, and other cases of incredible need, we have become accustomed to facing overwhelming need. So it can be easy to come to the end of our imagination about what we can do and instead to despair.

Not enough is not a final answer. When placed in the hands of Jesus, human weakness and limitation becomes more than enough. In 1946 when Agnes Bojaxhiu – later known as Mother Teresa came face to face with the masses of suffering and dying in Calcutta, she experienced the call to serve those suffering the most. Her knowledge, her wealth, and

her wisdom would never be enough. But love fueled her passion and as she offered what she had to God, she began the Missionaries of Charity, a small order of 13 members. In the decades to follow, the order grew to thousands of members giving care in many orphanages and charity centers.

In 1975 Millard and Linda Fuller began Habitat for Humanity International. At that time there were few resources and a great need for affordable and decent housing for the working poor. With a few tools and a small group of volunteers, it would have been easy to be overwhelmed and think they could not make a difference. But their passion for justice, was grounded in Jesus. Today Habitat for Humanity serves as a clear testimony to the multiplying power of love's knowledge.<sup>vi</sup>

All around us, including in this church, there are those with knowledge of human need but with very few resources. There are people on limited incomes, with physical or mental handicaps. In the face of it all, these resources are like a drop in the bucket. Yet, together, through our mission shares, through our work together, through the incredible way that Jesus takes what we have and multiplies it, we will be amazed at what God is able to do with whatever we bring and entrust to God. Out of our scarcity, God brings abundance.

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<sup>i</sup> Allen, Ronald J & Williamson, Clark M. Preaching the Gospels Without Blaming the Jews, Westminster John Knox Press, c 2004, p.141

<sup>ii</sup> Johnpavlovitz.com

<sup>iii</sup> Barros, Pearl Maria. "Miracles in our Midst" in Sojourner's "Preaching the Word" for 7/29

<sup>iv</sup> Wrencher, Brandon. "Bread or Junk Food" in Sojourner's "Preaching the Word" for 7/29

<sup>v</sup> Feasting on the Word, Ephesians – theological reflection.

<sup>vi</sup> Ibid, Homiletical Perspective