

“Living Abundance”
July 25, 2021
Scripture: John 6:1-21

This story in John’s gospel is one of very few that are told in all four gospels about Jesus’ life. That surely means something, but scholars are divided as to what. Why was it important to the early Christians to preserve this story of Jesus feeding a multitude with a few loaves and fish? I don’t think it’s enough to say, “Because it happened.” There must have been a lot of other things that also happened, and they’ve been lost in the mists of time. And just repeating a story doesn’t actually make it factual.

I’m inclined to put this story into the same category that the Native American storyteller, Black Elk, uses when he says, “I don’t know if this happened exactly this way, but I know this story is true.” Jesus’ feeding the multitudes from a very little amount may not have actually happened that way, but it’s a story that is true.

It’s true because it says something important about us and how we see the world around us and about God and what it means to participate in God’s kingdom. The gospel writer knows exactly what he’s doing in setting up this story by having Jesus initiate the conversation. It would never have occurred to the disciples, or any of us for that matter, that they might be responsible for feeding such a large mob of people. We look at that and can only see a shortage; there’s no way we could possibly find the resources to take care of them all.

We look at the world through a lens of scarcity. I suppose to a certain degree we’re designed that way. In our evolutionary past our prehistoric ancestors had to forage and hunt for what little sustenance they could find to survive. There may be a sort of genetic predisposition to assume there isn’t enough to go around, so we have to be careful with what we share. On the other hand, our species’ survival has mostly to do with our capacity to cooperate with one another. Civilizations are built on cooperation. They aren’t made up of a bunch of lone rangers just competing against each other. Yet even as a collective we tend to see through the lens of scarcity. It’s why we defend borders and wage war over natural resources.

Assuming scarcity, in all areas of life, leads to destructive practices and unjust systems. As the educator and theologian Parker J. Palmer observes in his book *The Active Life*, “From the teacher who grades on the curve to the administrator who rules by fiat, the control of the few over the many is rationalized by the scarcity assumption.” For the people around Jesus it meant dispersing the crowds and letting them fend for themselves. In Mark’s gospel that’s exactly how one of the disciples wants to handle things, “Let them go into the villages and buy something to eat.” What that means, of course, is some will have plenty, and probably more than they need, while others will go hungry. A scarcity model of the world dictates distribution will occur naturally as resources are available. But what about the ones who are left out?

Jesus refuses to be constrained by that model. He refuses to see the world through a scarcity lens. Instead, he offers abundance. This story in all four gospels provides a window into God’s kingdom. Normally, that’s the function of Jesus’ parables. He tells stories to evoke

insights into the nature of God's kingdom; Buddhism would call Jesus' parables "a finger pointing to the moon." They're meant to direct us toward the true object of his concern. But here Jesus isn't just telling a parable, he's enacting it. He's not just a finger pointing to the moon; he is the moon. Jesus becomes God's kingdom in this moment.

And in God's kingdom, abundance rules. I know there are lots of theories about what happened mechanically to multiply the loaves and fish, and I appreciate that. But really the miracle here isn't the multiplication, amazing as that is. The real miracle is the transformation that occurs when the mob seeking Jesus' attention becomes a community.

Because, what really is lost when scarcity drives our decisions? When we assume there's not enough to go around, we begin to hoard, to select, to protect, to isolate. We cut ourselves off from one another so we can be sure to have enough. Living from scarcity kills community. I'm reminded of that old story "Stone Soup." Three soldiers during the Napoleonic Wars enter a village hungry and tired looking for rest and sustenance. What they find is an abandoned town square because everyone is hiding in their own homes, afraid they'll lose what little they have if they trust strangers...or each other. But slowly the soldiers gain their trust and invite them out of their isolation to become the community they're meant to be. And what they discover is together they can create abundance out of their individual scarcity. None of them is rich or overflowing with food, but together they have more than they need because community creates abundance.

That's what God's kingdom is all about. Jesus embodies abundance and invites those around him to live abundance and reject scarcity. We know what can happen when people gather in community and learn to value rather than fear each other. For instance, when refugees are welcomed into our community and encouraged to create businesses and contribute to the economy, everybody is lifted. We all benefit when we're all valued. I find myself going back again to the book by Heather McGhee, *The Sum of Us*. If you've been to Chautauqua this summer you may have heard her speak. I watched her lecture online a week or so ago. She began with the question, "Why can't we have nice things?" She doesn't mean luxuries or fancy homes and cars. She means things like universal healthcare and affordable college educations. After much research and many interviews, she came to the conclusion that too many people in our country see racial relations in terms of a zero-sum game.

A zero-sum game says anything one player gains is lost by the other player. Cooperation in a zero-sum game is prohibited because it could lead to your opponent winning something. It's a worldview rooted in scarcity. If you have a large portion of the population convinced that anything beneficial to other people will take something away from them, then any effort to improve folks' lives will be resisted. In her book, McGhee tells the story of Ron Pollack who has spent his life advocating for poverty relief. When she asked him how racial issues have affected those efforts, he said, "I wish there was a greater consciousness about how we're all in this together. For those people who are opposed to government aid out of an animus to people who look different than they are...that lack of social solidarity causes harm to their own communities."

What Jesus is doing at the seashore is raising the consciousness of his disciples to the possibility of living abundance. He does that by creating community, bringing people together in

solidarity with one another. The reason this story is so important, why it's been preserved in our tradition, is it breaks open our reality by penetrating the illusion of scarcity and challenging us to embrace abundance through community. This is how God's kingdom emerges among us.

In light of that, we have a chance to look more closely at ourselves and our own systems of relationships to discover ways to live abundance. Where in our lives are we looking through a lens of scarcity and missing out on the abundance lying in front of us? Are there resources at our disposal that may seem meager but could be put to use in helping form community? Are we allowing gratitude to replace doubt and giving thanks for what's available instead of bemoaning what we lack? Living abundance requires changing our perspective in some fundamental ways beginning with the assumption there's not enough to go around or we lack the ability to make something substantial out of what seems like nothing.

In the end, Jesus isn't just doing parlor tricks for his disciples' amusement. He's inviting us all to become participants in God's kingdom and not just observers, to create community out of alienation, to put an end to the slow death of scarcity and start living abundance.

Amen