

“Imagining Abundance”

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Text: Mark 6: 32-44 and Ephesians 3:20-21

I don't know about you, but lately I have been really tired. Sure, some of it has been a hectic schedule with both jobs and community things. A lot of it, though, has been being tired in general. I'm tired of people bombing one another. I'm tired of hate between this group or that one. I'm tired because when a problem gets solved, a new one presents itself. I'm tired because...fill in the blank. I don't think I'm alone. A constant news cycle of less than helpful news (let's say), social media that can be a good thing, but often isn't, and stories from individuals about their struggles in life. Sometimes I can fix things. Other times I cannot, and I don't like it. Sometimes I see a solution, but don't have the energy to do anything about it. You know what I mean. I'm sure you are—or have been—in the same place. That's why it's interesting that the story of the feeding of the five thousand in the Gospel of Mark comes at a time when the disciples and likely Jesus are tired. It begins with them taking some time for themselves.

Earlier in the Gospel, the disciples have been sent out in pairs to cast out demons and heal the sick, all while carrying nothing with them and possibly facing frequent rejection (Mark 6: 7-13). They have heard of John the Baptist's beheading (Mark 6: 14-29). Jesus invites them, then, to a “deserted place.” Maybe it is for instruction. Maybe it's for rest. Maybe it's both. Maybe even Jesus needs some time to “clear his head.” I can relate.

Can you? As much as I love snow, I am more and more ready each day for the snow to melt so I can get out further in the woods and find them “deserted.”

However, word has spread that Jesus is in the area. It probably also has spread about what the disciples have been able to do. They may have attracted some of the crowd on their own—by their own acts of faithfulness. Nevertheless, some five thousand men (plus women and children) have gathered. Have you ever thought who was in that group? Who would leave family, work, or whatever else they had to do to go out in the middle of nowhere to listen to some teacher? They had to know on good authority that it was worth their while. And...maybe or...they were desperate. I haven’t had much luck with research about who made up that crowd. I think it’s reasonable to guess that they were poor (maybe living hand to mouth), sickly, old, or otherwise disadvantaged. We do know that this is how most people in the ancient near east were living. There was a lot of work to be done. Jesus and the disciples, hungry and weary themselves, had every reason to turn the people away and go about their respite.

The disciples get a lot of judgment over their desire to send the people on their way. The task seemed overwhelming to them. They knew they had limited physical, spiritual, and emotional energy to meet the needs of those around them. It was obvious that they didn’t have enough food. For all their faithful ability to heal people, to find their own food and lodging while they traveled, the crowd just seemed too immense. Exhausted people still care. People who feel they are without resources still want to help. People who are overwhelmed still want to make a difference. I think it’s unfair to the disciples to think them

greedy, or at least stingy. It's unfair to think of them as unfaithful or self-centered. How would any one of us be in the same situation?

I remember just about a year ago when this area experienced a colossal ice storm. While I pray for snow November 1 through March 1, I never like ice. Ice is dangerous in every way. Yet, it came. Multiple counties were devastated by layers of ice. Power was out. For many, that meant no water or sewer. For others, it meant no heat. Many were trapped in their homes. People went house-to-house to assess needs in the midst of a terrible disaster. I helped some. You helped some. Everyone brought what they could to the table. Churches and community groups worked together to help bring people back to wholeness as much as we could. Government offered help, whether we think it was enough or not. Everyone had to depend on someone else to get things done. Maybe you were good with a chainsaw, or you had some food to share, or had a skill to offer. Whatever it was, the community provided and eventually we made it through. As givers and receivers—sometimes at the same time—we pulled together.

This is what may be missing from a lot of interpretations of this story in all three Gospels in which it appears. We get all focused-on Jesus working a miracle. Do you remember his instructions to the disciples? “You feed them,” he said. He told them to gather what they have, bring it to him and together they'd figure it out. They brought him five loaves and two fish. Surely, that was not enough to feed the multitudes. I can't prove it to you, but I wonder if what was brought forth encouraged others to share what they had. Even with what little they possessed, I think it's very possible that people brought something with them. It wouldn't be crazy to think that they brought at least bread with them. I'm not

at all trying to minimize Jesus' role here, but I think we all minimize the role of everyone else who was at this miraculous meal. Perhaps what Jesus did most here was to train people not just to give, but also to receive. In his article, *The Liturgy of Abundance, The Myth of Scarcity*, the late Walter Brueggemann reminds us that "God created a world of great abundance. If we share, there is enough for all."

Brueggemann begins this way:

The majority of the world's resources pour into the United States. And as we Americans grow more and more wealthy, money is becoming a kind of narcotic for us. We hardly notice our own prosperity or the poverty of so many others. The great contradiction is that we have more and more money and less and less generosity—less and less public money for the needy, less charity for the neighbor.

Robert Wuthnow, sociologist of religion at Princeton University put it even more directly, "We have a love affair with 'more'—and we will never have enough. Consumerism is not simply a marketing strategy. It has become a demonic spiritual force among us, and the theological question facing us is whether the gospel has the power to help us withstand it.

I don't know that the people in that first crowd around Jesus had a consumerism problem like we do, but I am sure that they, too, had a lot of personal financial concerns to address. Maybe some of them originally hoarded their bread because they feared they would run out if they were to share. We're taught to be "frugal" and to be "wise" with our money and other resources. We're taught from an early age that everything is scarce. Of course, there is truth to that, but if you buy my argument that the original crowd here was likely way more impoverished than we are, then questions start to arise. What is God up to here? What does God say in the face of our arguments of scarcity? What does God say

when we logically conclude that we don't have enough. Not enough money. Not enough time. Not enough energy.

Brueggemann continues,

“The Bible starts out with a liturgy of abundance. Genesis 1 is a song of praise for God's generosity. It tells us how the world is ordered. It keeps saying, 'It is good, it is good, it is good, it is very good.' It declares that God blesses—that is, endows with vitality—the plants and the animals and the fish and the birds and humankind. And it pictures the creator as saying, 'Be fruitful and multiply.' In an orgy of fruitfulness, everything in its kind is to multiply the overflowing goodness that pours from God's creative spirit. And as you know, the creation ends in Sabbath. God is so overrun with fruitfulness that God says, 'I've got to take a break from all this. I've got to get out of the office.’”

Brueggemann then draws us to Psalm 104, the longest creation poem, as a commentary of Genesis 1. “The psalmist surveys creation and names it all: the heavens and the earth, the waters and springs and streams and trees and birds and goats and wine and oil and bread and people and lions.” The naming continues for 23 verses and ends in the 24th verse in which the author expresses awe and praise for God and God's creation. Here's the most important part, “[In] verses 27 and 28” in something like a table prayer, the author proclaims, “You give them all food in due season, you feed everybody...God is utterly, utterly reliable. The fruitfulness of the world is guaranteed.”

We're not done... Now we head to Psalm 150, the last one, which is “an exuberant expression of amazement at God's goodness.” The three scriptures referenced here proclaim, “God's force of life...loose in the world. Genesis 1 affirms generosity and denies scarcity. Psalm 104 celebrates the buoyancy of creation and rejects anxiety. Psalm 150 enacts abandoning oneself to God and letting go of the need to have everything under control.”

Clearly, these scriptures reminds us of God's abundance...including this story of the feeding of the 5000. There is no question that the world has enough food for everyone. God has provided. So, what gets in the way of enough for all? Maybe it's disciples like us saying, "we can't do it, send them away," or maybe it's because enough people aren't working together to meet the needs of others, or maybe it's because we don't have the ability to move food from one place to another safely. I'm sure you can rule that last one out. I was just searching for what gets in the way of us fulfilling Jesus' command, "You feed them!" Sure, the "you" meant the disciples, but I'm sure you'll agree they didn't do this alone. I'm suggesting to you that while Jesus was involved, he didn't do all the work. The miracle was in the crowd itself.

This ongoing battle between scarcity and abundance is as old as the Bible itself. Brueggemann relates the story of Pharaoh and how his fear of "not enough good things to go around so he has to have them all" that we have in the book of Exodus. "By the end of Exodus, Pharaoh has been as mean, brutal and ugly as he knows how to be—and as the myth of scarcity tends to be." To what end will we go when we are fearful and think there won't be enough? Finally, Pharaoh let's Moses, Aaron, and their little group, "Take your people and leave. Take your flocks and herds and just get out of here!" only then to ask Moses and Aaron to bless him. Pharaoh is not the last leader to play that game. Scarcity mentality leads all of us to do things we'd never imagine. But in the end, "The powers of scarcity (represented by Pharaoh) admit to this little community of abundance, 'It is clear that you are the wave of the future. So, before you leave, lay your powerful hands upon us and give us energy.' The text shows that the power of the future is not in the hands of those

who believe in scarcity and monopolize the world's resources; it is in the hands of those who trust God's abundance."

"Whether we are liberal or conservative Christians, we must confess that the central problem of our lives is that we are torn apart by the conflict between our attraction to the good news of God's abundance and the power of our belief in scarcity—a belief that makes us greedy, mean and unneighborly. We spend our lives trying to sort out that ambiguity ...Wouldn't it be wonderful if liberal and conservative church people, who love to quarrel with each other, came to a common realization that the real issue confronting us is whether the news of God's abundance can be trusted in the face of the story of scarcity (Brueggemann)?"

That leads me to the final point this morning... What is making us tired? Is it the work we do? Probably. Is it all the worrying we do about having enough? Maybe. Is it the work we do to hoard because we are afraid? Could be. I think it's most likely all of those things, but also our decreasing ability to work together to solve problems. To feed the 5000+, Jesus, the disciples, and I believe the crowd, all had to work together. Until we do that at least at some level, I'm not sure much changes.

"Our faith is not just about spiritual matters; it is about the transformation of the world. The closer we stay to Jesus, the more we will bring a new economy of abundance to the world...It is, of course, easier to talk about these things than to live them. Many people both inside and outside of the church haven't a clue that Jesus is talking about the economy. We haven't taught them that he is. But we must begin to do so now, no matter how economically compromised we may feel. Our world absolutely requires this news. It has nothing to do with being Republicans or Democrats, liberals or conservatives, socialists, or capitalists. It is much more elemental: The creation is infused with the Creator's generosity, and we can find practices, procedures and institutions that allow that generosity to work...Sharing our abundance may be impossible for mortals, but nothing is

impossible for God. None of us knows what risks God's spirit may empower us to take. Our faith, ministry, and hope...are that the Creator will empower us to trust [God's] generosity, so that bread may abound (Brueggemann)."

In the many blessed names of God. Amen.