

Abundance or Scarcity? The Choice is Yours  
Based on Genesis 41:1-37 and Mark 6:30-44  
A Message Offered by Toby Jones to FCUCC Gaylord, 10/14/18

As we move into our second week of the 2019 stewardship and pledge drive, I want to ask you a deep down, heart level question: Do you operate out of an assumption of scarcity or out of an assumption of abundance? When you see a certain amount of food and then a certain number of people, do you tend to assume there *will* be enough to go around or are you usually worried that you'll run out of food? When you receive a request for a donation from the Salvation Army, from Habitat for Humanity, or even from this church, do you tend to assume that there *won't* be enough BOTH to write that donation check AND to take care of your other bills and your weekly shopping? Or do you go ahead and write the donation check, believing that, somehow, there *will be* enough to go around?

I grew up with a mother who lived out of the principle of scarcity. Maybe it was because she was born during the depression, but mom never thought there would be enough. In fact, mom had a hard and fast rule in our house. If we wanted to invite a friend over for dinner, we had to ask mom a full 24 hours beforehand. And the reason for this rule was that mom was constantly afraid that if we invited someone at the last minute, there simply wouldn't be enough food for everyone. You see, she operated out of an assumption of scarcity, fearful that there wouldn't be enough food if our table suddenly had to accommodate one more person.

But growing up, I had a friend over in Bay View whose mom operated out of the exact opposite assumption. If anyone was over at their cottage - even in the late afternoon - with any of her 5 children - and most days there were at least a handful of us non-family members over there - Mrs. Black would invite us all, right then and there, to stay for dinner. She knew there'd be enough. She knew that the upside of hospitality and of expanding her table would far outweigh any possible shrinking of portions for those already at the table. At my house, we always had plenty of food, but I believe we were impoverished by our lack of spontaneity and hospitality. We were impoverished by our assumption of scarcity.

In Mark chapter 6, we see these two contrasting assumptions at work. The disciples are clearly operating out of an assumption of scarcity. They look at the crowd of nearly 5000 people, they look at the

five loaves and 2 fish that they have between them, and they assume that there is no way that there will be enough. Jesus, however, looks at the exact same number of people, the exact same number of loaves and fish, but since Jesus operates out of an assumption of abundance, Jesus comes to a very different conclusion than the disciples did, looking at the very same body of evidence.

Now I know I've told you this before, but I'm going to tell you again: I *don't* believe that Jesus "multiplied" the loaves and fishes here. I don't believe that he said some magical mumbo jumbo and miraculously turned those 5 loaves to 500 or those 2 fish to 2000. I'm NOT saying that that kind of multiplication *couldn't* have happened. Certainly the Son of God could have pulled that off. I'm just saying I don't think that it *did* happen that way, because I don't think Jesus is interested in *that kind* of multiplication. I think what Jesus is much more interested in the kind of multiplication that my dear Ethiopian friend from seminary experienced back in the 1970's. I'm sure I've told you this story before as well.

Bishop Abuno Paulos was one of the highest officials in the Ethiopian Orthodox Church, when long-time King Haile Selassie was overthrown by a bloody, Communist-led coup. The first move of Selassie's ousters was to capture and imprison all the major leaders in the Ethiopian Church, and my friend Bishop Paulos was among the captives. The new Communist leader lined up all the churchmen in his palace and gave them a choice – renounce their faith and promise never to practice it again, or be placed in solitary confinement, presumably for the rest of their lives. My friend Bishop Paulos chose imprisonment and was escorted to a 7x7x7 cement cell out in the desert heat with no light, little air, and one measly "meal" per day. The meal, delivered by a prison guard each morning, consisted of a single crust of bread and a small cup of water. Bishop Paulos lived on that and that alone for seven years. Seven years! When he told me this story, I choked on my tears and asked, "How could you have survived on such little sustenance? Why didn't you starve to death?" I've never forgotten his answer. He said, "When the guard brought my daily meal" – he really called it a meal! – "I thanked him for it. Then I prayed, thanking God and asking Him to multiply it in my heart so that it would be enough. And it was. It was always enough."

Scarcity...or Abundance? When Bishop Paulos told me his story, I assumed that a piece of bread and a cup of water could never be enough. But the Bishop assumed the opposite. He assumed that whatever the

guard gave him would always be enough. Scarcity or abundance...Which assumption holds sway in your heart?

Chip Duncan - documentary filmmaker, writer, photographer, and close friend of mine, wrote a book a number of years ago that I recommend to you. It's a coffee table book with incredible photos from all over the world, but the stories in it are even better. Its title is *Enough to Go Around*, and Chip begins the book with a story about a poor Ethiopian man's spontaneous act of sharing, done without calculation or even consciousness. This poor friend of Chip's, Abraham Bongassi, had a tiny, simple sandwich, nothing more than a small white bun with a little butter and a few scraps of chicken on it. As Abraham was about to eat his meager sandwich, a random man passed by, right where Chip and Abraham were standing. The passerby was neither looking at Abraham nor begging. But Abraham, without even looking at the man or calling any attention to the act, tore his sandwich in half and handed half to the passerby, who never even broke stride as he took it

My friend Chip reflected on Abraham's innate generosity, linking it to a concept he had encountered in South America. The word Chip borrows to explain Abraham's act is a Quechua word pronounced Ay-ni, and it means "sharing without thinking, sharing as a natural act." This kind of sharing, this "Ay-ni," neither calculates the cost nor stops to consider whether there'll be enough for the giver. Ay-ni just happens.

It's my sense that what Jesus is after in his followers is a little Ay-ni. Ay-ni is faithful giving, because it is full of faith that there is going to be enough...enough to go around. What Jesus wants is for us is to see a poor person as one of *us* - not a them - a member of the family of God. And Jesus doesn't want us to pull out a calculator or call our accountant to determine how much we should give. He wants us to give first and do the math later. I think, ideally, that's how our church stewardship drive or pledge campaign should work as well. Our trustees present the need to us. In the budget we are given a number, an estimate of what it will take in dollars and cents to do everything we want to do here in Gaylord in the next year. Our role as participants in this amazing congregation is to assume abundance and give accordingly. We're not to fill out our pledge cards fearfully, afraid that we won't have enough. We're to handle this like my friend's mom - Mrs. Black - handled the dinner over at her always crowded house. She always just extended the invitation first and worried about whether there'd be enough later.

It's strange, but one thing I noticed about myself is that when I lost my full time job almost 10 years ago – losing my pension, my health insurance, and other benefits with it – I became a much better tipper at restaurants. Without even really thinking about it, I gave waitresses and waiters more in tips than I did, when I was making twice as much money and was twice as “secure” financially. It's counter intuitive, isn't it? But, lo and behold, studies of tipping patterns have been done, and guess what they show...? Poorer people are often better tippers than wealthy people. I wonder why? Perhaps this poem by Jane Kenyon sheds some light on the generosity of the poor.

“Otherwise” by Jane Kenyon.

*I got out of bed on two strong legs  
...It might have been otherwise.  
I ate cereal, sweet milk,  
ripe, flawless peach...  
It might have been otherwise.  
I took the dog uphill to the birch wood.  
All morning I did the work I love.*

*At noon I lay down with my mate...It might have been otherwise.  
We ate dinner together at a table with silver candlesticks...  
It might have been otherwise.  
I slept in a bed,  
in a room with paintings on the walls,  
and planned another day just like this day.  
But one day, I know,  
it will be otherwise.*

Friends, God created this world with enough for everyone. There is plenty to go around, plenty for everyone, if we're grateful for all that we have. But we know that we humans have messed up this balance that God intended. Every day we hear about people who don't have enough and don't seem to have any way of doing anything about it. People who assume scarcity encounter the poor fearfully, holding tightly to their wallets and possessions. But Jesus and his followers assume abundance, knowing that the real problem is one of distribution, not of supply.

Jesus said, “If you have two coats, give one to someone who has none. If you have two shirts, give one of them to someone who has none.” It may be time for us to clean out our closets. Quaker theologian Parker Palmer summarizes the Bible as, “the story of people living in situations of supposed scarcity, but unexpectedly discovering true abundance. May it be so in our lives and in all lives. Amen.