

Busting the Myth of Scarcity with a Meal of Abundance

2 Kings 4:42-44 • John 6:1-21

The Very Rev. Tracey Lind

The Chapel of St. James the Fisherman, Wellfleet, MA

July 29, 2018

Stirring the simmering soup made from the last contents of her pantry, she wondered: will it last through the weekend? What if I run out before the food bank opens on Monday? And then, smelling the rich and savory aroma rising from the pot, she remembered a neighbor who loved her soups. So, when it was finished, she walked out the kitchen door to share her offering. Reflecting on the day, she said: "The sharing of my soup with a friend made it better, and I found myself less worried about making ends meet."¹

How often do we get trapped in the scarcity myth – our fear of not having or being enough? The Bible tells us that there is enough of what we need to survive, and even thrive, if we, and those around us, are willing to share what we have.

In this morning's Hebrew scripture reading, during a period of famine, following the Torah's commandment to share the first fruits of one's harvest, a man brought twenty loaves of barley and a sack of grain to the prophet Elisha. Elisha said, "Feed it to the people." The prophet's assistant questioned the command. How are we going to feed so many people with so little food? Elisha determined that twenty loaves of bread and an undisclosed amount of corn would be enough to feed the hundred hungry people hanging around him. He believed that God would make it be enough. So the prophet repeated himself, "Give it to the people...for thus says the LORD, `They shall eat and have some left.'" The attendant set the food before the people, and they ate and had leftovers.

Yes, a miracle occurs in this story: a sack of grain and twenty barley loaves feed one hundred people, with food remaining. It's a miracle made possible by God's abundant provision and humanity's generous sharing.

In all four Gospels, Jesus repeated this miracle by fifty-fold. Each account is slightly different, but "The Feeding of the Multitudes" (as it's come to be known) was a really important story for the early Christian community. And, I think it's a really important story for today's world. The busting of the scarcity myth is one of the most important of all of Jesus' actions and teachings.

Since the Gospel of John, the last of the canonical gospels, written at least fifty years after Mark's Gospel, was composed in the shadow of the synagogue, John's listeners probably knew the story of Elisha, and they certainly knew the story of the Exodus, complete with the account of manna coming from heaven to feed the hungry journeyers in the wilderness.

So what does John's non-eyewitness-account of the feeding of the multitude recall? The gospel writer tells us that Jesus asked Philip a question to which he already knew the answer. Was he

trying to test Philip's ingenuity, his leadership, his generosity, or his faith in a God who provides?

I don't want to make light of Philip's concern. It was real. It reminds me of the words of a Kentucky coal miner's wife written on a Sister Corita poster: "You don't know what to do when you've got five children standing around crying for something to eat, and you don't know where to get it, and you don't know which way to start to get it. I just get nervous or something." I think Philip was rightfully nervous.

Andrew, another disciple, saw a little boy with some food. Perhaps, he was carrying the daily meal home to his family and stopped to listen to Jesus. Andrew didn't think it would go very far. And that's when our Lord began his brilliant community organizing. Jesus told his disciples, his organizers-in-training, to instruct the people to sit down. Then he took the little boy's lunch of two fish and five barley loaves, and in the presence of the seated community, he lifted it up before God hoping, praying, and trusting that it would be enough to satisfy their needs. The disciples then distributed among the people for them to eat.

Again, a miracle occurred, a sign of Jesus' God-given power and grace. But what was the miracle? I don't believe that Jesus miraculously multiplied the loaves and fish. After all, he resisted that temptation in the wilderness.

The miracle was in the sharing – the blessing, breaking, giving and receiving of God's abundance. The Creator provided for the barley and the fish. A farmer grew the grain and an angler caught the fish. A baker made the loaves and a cook prepared the fish. A young boy generously shared his lunch (I'd like to think he could have refused). Jesus organized the people into community and took the risk to offer up what he had been given and ask for God's blessing upon it, trusting that it would be enough. He then gave it away, believing that it was enough.

Now here's where I might be wrong, and I know that I'm reading into the text, but I think that when the loaves and fish were placed within the community, in the middle of the circle, people began to share what they had brought for lunch that day, for many, if not most, of these folks had not come empty-handed. Fruit, cheese, bread, cucumbers, olives, fish, and yes, wine began to emerge from bags, baskets, and packs. There was enough food for a feast, a banquet. The people ate all they wanted and were satisfied. And of course, like all potlucks (including the one we had at the Chapel on Wednesday evening), there were leftovers, twelve baskets full.

Then, Jesus did something even more remarkable; he collected up with great care and intention what Jan Richardson calls "the fragments of the feast." Jesus saw "the abundance that persisted in the leftovers." Perhaps, he was going to share the leftovers with those he would meet along the way, or perhaps, he was going to send them with members of the crowd to those who couldn't or simply didn't get to this great banquet.

As Richardson points out: “We might think the marvel of the story is that there is enough for everyone. And yet for Jesus, enough does not seem to be enough. There is more: a meal that depends on paying attention to what has been left behind, on turning toward what has been tossed aside. Call it the persistence of wonder, or the stubbornness of the miraculous: how Christ casts his circle around the fragments, will not lose his hold on what is broken and in pieces. How he gathers them up: a sign of the wholeness he can see; a foretaste of the banquet to come. It is part of the miracle: how Jesus, with such intention, cares for the fragments following the feast. He sees the abundance that persists, the feast that remains within the fragments.”⁴

At that point in the story, the people say: “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.” No wonder they wanted to take him by force and make him king.

This was Eucharist, Holy Communion, the Lord's Supper. Jesus took the bread, blessed it, broke it, and gave to them, saying, “Take and eat.” When artists depict early Christian worship, they often include the image of the loaves and fish. The art on the walls of ancient Christian catacombs depict “large baskets of bread and platters of fish set around a table with people enjoying the food...[In one catacomb], an inscription says the women call ‘Bring it warm.’ The early church framed its most important ritual meal as the act of feeding.”⁵

One of the most radical (that is, root) elements of Jesus’ ministry was to remind us of the messianic banquet with a place at the table for all, enough food to go around, and leftovers for those who couldn’t be present. Hunger, food insecurity, famine, and starvation are simply not the result of a lack of food, but rather, a lack of sharing.

When we feast at Jesus’ table, we are reminded that God’s grace is infinite, and we are called to share the abundance of it with the world around us. For the church, that means inviting everyone we meet to the table, and then — fed with the Body of Christ — running soup kitchens, food pantries, and community gardens. It also means organizing to eliminate hunger through local, national and global public policies that seek to improve nutrition, level the agricultural playing field (especially for small farmers), and increase food production and accessibility for all God’s children, especially for the poorest of the poor.

Today’s scripture readings remind us that abundance is a gift from God, but it’s doesn’t happen without human participation. As Buckminster Fuller once said, “Real wealth is indestructible and without practical limit. It can be neither created nor lost -- and it leaves one system only to join another. Real wealth is knowing what to do with energy.” Fuller suggested that the human intellect has the ability to use what he called “cosmic” and I will call God-given “resources of energy” and make them produce for the good of humanity.⁶

At the end day, the woman who shared her soup realized that she would be all right, for she was rich in things that matter: friendship, hope and love. May you who are worried about not having enough, or not being enough, rest assured that while you might not always get what you want, with the grace of God and your participation in that grace, you will receive what you need,

and then some. And may you who have plenty remember that those to whom much is given, much is expected.

-
1. This vignette was inspired by Doreen Frick's reflection, "Enough Soup to Share," *Alive Now*, September/October 2011.
 2. Jan Richardson, "Gathering the Fragments," PaintedPrayerbook.com
 3. Rita Nakashima Brock and Rebecca Ann Parker, *Saving Paradise: How Christianity Traded Love of This World for Crucifixion and Empire*, p. 30.