

John 6. 1-13

A Sermon Preached at the Larchmont Avenue Church

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Scarcity, Abundance and Grace

The disciples were a bit put off it seems, or certainly taken by surprise. The numbers of people gathered appear to be larger than expected. It would have been easier if this were just a gathering for discussion. But no, a large group had come to hear Jesus; and they stayed. And, not only that, there was the expectation of a meal, which Jesus himself brings up. He says: "Where are we going to buy bread to feed all these people?"

He appears to have an answer, even while he asks the question of the disciple named Philip. In a very basic response – not unlike church committees we know and love, not to mention congressional committees of late -- Philip assesses the size of the task, the limited resources and, of course, the cost: "O my gosh," he says, "it will take six months' wages to feed a multitude like this!" (It's big: Matthew's Gospel estimates the crowd to be 5000 in number!)

What to do? Where to go? There is no real response to Jesus' question about where we might find enough bread, there on the shores of the Sea of Galilee, a considerable distance from the closest towns of Tiberius or Capernaum.

Philip is struck by, and stuck on, the scarcity of the situation. "There is no way, no how." And in a tone that might be despairing or sarcastic, or both, Philip says: "There's a boy here who has 2 fish and 5 loaves of bread. But what good is that among so many people?"

Philip is the only one of the disciples we hear from, or about, in this story of the feeding of the multitudes. I'm not sure why. It's an episode that appears in each of the 4 Gospels. Yet, John's Gospel is the only one which mentions any response from any of the 12 disciples.

Could it be that they are concerned and even frightened about the available amounts and dwindling resources? It may be so, as if they are saying: "These gatherings are great. But let's not expect the folks to stay! Sure, hearing the word is fine. But, let's keep on going. No need to have all of them remain for dinner."

Is it the scarcity that is scaring the disciples? Or, could it also be a sense of exclusiveness setting in? . . . Which is to say, "We are fine . . . just as we are, a good group of twelve. Yea, sure, it's nice to rub elbows with the others. But do we really need or want to sit down together, and talk and share . . . much less feed, and be fed by, one another. I mean, share a meal . . . for God's sake?"

Philip – that one who speaks up – might be discounting the boy's meager fish and loaves as a means by which to avoid or dismiss any possibility that they would or could actually provide a meal for the multitude. It's like he's saying: "Hey Jesus, it's just a kid over here with nothing but the lunch that his mother packed for him. Let's call it a day, and send the folks home . . ."

Excuses. Excuses. It appears. Maybe they're living with the sense that the glass is half empty. You know, that outlook on life by which we proceed to marshal and manage our resources and choices with a focus only on the limitedness and constraints upon us.

Maybe that's the attitude and approach which the disciples have come upon, and only Philip has the nerve to bring up . . . Fiscal restraint. Meager reserves. No more to be risked. Hindered and hurt by past performance with previous ventures.

OK, sure. The recent past days have brought that home to us.

A one day 777 point drop in the stock market. A market loss of 1.2 trillion dollars, in the course of that rapid decline. 159,000 jobs eliminated . . . All this with ripples that we can feel and see all around us. Mortgages once counted on, now counted out. Retirements at risk. College loans in question. A friend told me of a shop keeper in lower Manhattan who's now hurt by the down-turn; it's all around him. "He said people here on the street are like they were on 9/11."

5 weeks ago, Lehman Brothers was a revered American institution. Sarah Palin was an unknown. The Mets were in first place. The Cubs too.

Things can and do change, precipitously, quickly.

While some back then deemed the economy fundamentally sound, most would now admit that we are in a recession.

It is tough and it is bound to get tougher.

One reaction is to cast blame. Given the season of repentance and atonement in the Jewish community, Cokie Roberts on ABC TV called for the financial managers who helped precipitate this economic crisis to be paraded down Wall Street in sackcloth and ashes, along with their congressional counterparts . . . (It was a religious moment for Cokie. I'm told she's actually Methodist.)

There is cause for repentance, to be sure . . . for members of Congress it could mean, repenting of . . .

Perhaps the putting of other things, including ideology, re-election, and partisan advantage ahead of the national interest and the common good - not just recently, but for years.

Repenting of . . . perhaps paying more attention to the financial benefits to the country's financial institutions (that, in most cases, also significantly benefit them) than to the benefits coming to the average Americans whom they represent and serve.

Repenting of . . . Perhaps focusing more on a Wall Street bailout than to the relief of those suffering disastrous housing foreclosures or the loss of jobs; and preferring a top-down rescue rather than a bottom-up one.

As for the rest of us, perhaps we could also reflect on our need for repentance . . .

For being seduced into lifestyles beyond our means and contrary to our religious traditions of simplicity and stewardship.

For living on far too much credit, rather than living within our limits.

For sometimes putting economic values ahead of family values.

For letting the relentless assault of advertising and a culture of consumption create in us the sin of covetousness.

For valuing our lives too much by the cultural values of worth, instead of by the values of the kingdom of God: That we are not loved because of our worth, but we have worth because we are loved . . . by God.

Again, these are tough times and going to be tougher. In finance and government, we are bound to witness a renewed sense of covenant with standards and re-regulations . . . for the workings of our country and community.

In the meantime, the church has been and is that covenant community, that community of support and compassion for one another, proclaiming good news, reaching out with care . . .

Our Church is that, in the gatherings of all ages here to be fed in body and soul, in our sanctuary, in our kitchen, in the places and the experiences of sharing, and sharing God's love.

We have had a number conversations and concerns expressed in recent days about these times. Going forward, our calling in faith, is to be of support. Coming together in care, helping ourselves by helping others.

Let us begin with listening to each other – who we are, and what is on our heart and burdens we carry. In the circles of sharing and meeting, and in circles of the prayer – see one of us pastors, or call the LAC prayer connection to join in one. And reaching out – there's lots to do . . . You might start with Cheerios – really.

The \$4 it costs for the box of Cheerios you bring by here for the HOPE Food Pantry, is \$4 dollars our neighbors at the HOPE food pantry who receive the Cheerios can then count on for their monthly rent and other basics . . . and they're counting a lot these days to make ends meet.

In the sharing of what we bring, the giving of ourselves with love for one another, grace is multiplied, from meager to abundance . . . in Jesus Christ, Amen