

Sermon – 7/29/18
“Scarcity or Abundance?”
1 Kings 4:42-44; John 6:1-21
10th Sunday after Pentecost
Davidson College Presbyterian Church – Davidson, NC
Scott Kenefake, Interim Pastor

2 Kings 4:42-44

⁴²A man came from Baal-shalishah, bringing food from the first fruits to the man of God: twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain in his sack. Elisha said, “Give it to the people and let them eat.” ⁴³But his servant said, “How can I set this before a hundred people?” So he repeated, “Give it to the people and let them eat, for thus says the LORD, “They shall eat and have some left.” ⁴⁴He set it before them, they ate, and had some left, according to the word of the LORD.

John 6:1-21

⁶After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. ²A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. ³Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. ⁴Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. ⁵When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” ⁶He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. ⁷Philip answered him, “Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.” ⁸One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter’s brother, said to him, ⁹“There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?” ¹⁰Jesus said, “Make the people sit down.” Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they sat down, about five thousand in all. ¹¹Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹²When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, “Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost.” ¹³So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. ¹⁴When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, “This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world.”

¹⁵When Jesus realized that they were about to come and take him by force to make him king, he withdrew again to the mountain by himself. ¹⁶When evening came, his disciples went down to the sea, ¹⁷got into a boat, and started across the sea to Capernaum. It was now dark, and Jesus had not yet come to them. ¹⁸The sea became rough because a strong wind was blowing. ¹⁹When they had rowed about three or four miles, they saw Jesus walking on the sea and coming near the boat, and they were terrified. ²⁰But he said to them, “It is I; do not be afraid.” ²¹Then they wanted to take him into the boat, and immediately the boat reached the land toward which they were going.

Lately, I’ve been thinking a lot about ... *Farmers’ Markets*. You see, starting in the mid-2000’s, consumer demand for foods that are fresher (spend less time in transit) and for foods with more variety—has led to growth in farmers’ markets as a food retailing mechanism—like the one here in Davidson on Saturday mornings.

They are now ubiquitous in large and small communities all around the country.

Church Historian, Diana Butler Bass, shared a wonderful story about her local Farmers’ Market a few years ago in her best-selling book, *Grounded: Finding God in the World-A Spiritual Revolution*:

“Five years ago, I began shopping at the Farmers’ Market about a mile away from my house. Everything comes from within a hundred-mile (or so) radius and is grown by the sellers. Every week from May to November, I have gone to this same market, buying from the same vendors. As the weeks, months, and years have progressed, I have discovered that this was an experience far different from shopping at the chain grocery store. Here, I got to know the farmers—old-time working family farmers from Virginia and Pennsylvania, new immigrants from Mexico, well-off retirees growing

organic crops or raising free-range animals. They are a religiously diverse group: Catholics, Protestants, Mennonites, and Muslims, with a few spiritual-but-not-religious folks in the mix.

They have taught me about farming practices and managing land, confided their hopes and fears for the future of American farms, and shared their passion for good food. I know where my food comes from and how rainfall and sunlight and temperature have an impact on the crops.

At the market, I picked up tips from the local gardening club, talked with local politicians, met with local clergy, and shadowed a local chef to see what local produce he purchased (I bought the same). Regulars recognize me, asking whether shared recipes had worked, if my family had enjoyed vacation, and how my next book was going.

*Although I might run into someone I know at the grocery store on any random day, the contrast with the Farmers' Market could not be more obvious: **it is a community, and a lively spiritual one at that.** It is a model of reciprocity, of mutual exchange, where the typical boundaries that separate suburban dwellers come down. Not surprisingly, a Farmers' Market is about food. Eating together—or, in this case, shopping together to eat—in an act of **hospitality.**"¹*

Community. Reciprocity. Overcoming boundaries. Eating together. Hospitality.

I want you to think about these things in terms of our Gospel Reading this morning from John—the *feeding of the multitudes*—because it's a story that echoes these themes, as well.

You see, separated from its historical context, this story reads like a straight-forward *miracle story*, a story about the miraculous multiplication of food. But when you place it in the context of chapter six as a whole, you quickly realize that it's actually a *Eucharistic Story—a Communion Story*. And when you place it within the context of John's Gospel as a whole, you recall how Moses looms large in this Gospel. That is why John so often repeated the designation of Jesus as *the prophet promised by Moses*. (And) if he is going to be identified in this Moses role, then stories of Moses must be wrapped around him.

So, here's the shorthand key to understanding the metaphors and symbols of the story:

- Jesus=Moses
- Loaves & Fishes=Manna
- Walking on Water=Red Sea/Exodus

Two dramatic Moses stories are the power seen in the feeding of the hungry multitude in the wilderness with heavenly bread called *manna*, which was rained down from the sky, and the power seen in the splitting of the Red Sea. Both of these stories were *survival stories*. God, through Moses, had saved the children of Israel from death by starvation with heavenly food and God, through Moses, had saved them from death at the hands of the Egyptians by delivering them through the watery grave in the midst of the sea.²

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John is saying to his readers that Jesus must be to them *both* a new Moses and a new *doorway* into the meaning of God.

And this insight becomes clearer when we lower the walls of literalism in our minds.

This is important to understand because the *Incarnation Mystery* is repeated and represented in the Eucharist. In it we have material reality, in the form of these universal foods of bread and wine, as the hiding place and the revelation

¹ Diana Butler Bass, *Ground: Discovering God in the Word—A Spiritual Revolution*, Harper One, New York, 2015, pp. 224, 225

² John Shelby Spong, *The Fourth Gospel: Tales of a Jewish Mystic*, Harper One, New York, 2013, pp. 129, 130, 132

place for God. We are reminded that God is always perfectly hidden and perfectly revealed in this very concrete and material world. This is the *Cosmic Christ* experience, more than simply a Jesus experience.

In other words, human relationship with the divine normally starts with the specific, the concrete, the “scandal of the particular,” and then we universalize from there—but the realization process takes the whole of our lives.

Ask yourself: “*Where is God?*” The answer (of course) is that, “*God is everywhere.*”

The pinnacle of prayer is reached when we can trust that we are constantly in the presence of God. We cannot *not* be in the presence of God! Where would we go? As the psalmist reflects, if we go up to the heavens or underneath the earth, we still can’t get away from God (see Psalm 139:7-10). God is either in all things, or God is in nothing. Eucharistic bread and wine ground this whole realization in *one tremendous thing* (which will still and always be too much to absorb, but we must begin somewhere).

You know, many Christians say they believe in the Presence in the Eucharist, but they don’t get that it is *everywhere*—which is the whole point! They don’t seem to know how to recognize the Presence of God when they leave the church, when they meet people who are of a different religion or race or sexual orientation or nationality. They cannot also trust that every person is created in the image of God. Jesus spent a great deal of his ministry trying to break down the false distinctions between “God’s here” and “God’s not there.” He dared to see God everywhere, even in sinners, in enemies, in failures, and in outsiders. Usually, early stage religion is not yet capable of that, but fortunately God is patient with all of us and with history itself.³

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And so, bread is blessed and shared, a reminder that food is a gift from God, the gift that gives life to our bodies; wine is blessed and shared, a reminder that drink is a gift from God, a gift that gives joy to our souls. God gives good gifts of favor and grace; the people receive and respond with promises of faithfulness and thanksgiving.

In fact, the Christian celebration echoes those ancient Hebrew festivals in which the Jews recognized and received God’s gifts of *abundance* and, with humility, returned gratefulness. God does not need to be convinced to give or begged to send favor. But human beings need to be reminded that *abundance* is the nature of existence. The Jews went to Jerusalem two or three times a year to remember this and give thanks for it.

And Christians go to their congregations weekly or monthly to do the same—to feast upon (that is, have a “festival” of) gratefulness.

The Jewish and Christian settings are different (of course), but the biblical story of abundance and thanks is pretty much the same. That is what church is intended to be: a festive community dependent on gifts of abundance. Everything is a gift. Bread is a gift; wine is a gift; life and joy are gifts. No one can ever pay them back. God never withholds. All we can do is receive—in awe of such favor and grace—say thank you to the Giver, and then “pay it forward” with humble service to others. Just like the Jews. But for Christians, the story is mediated through Jesus. Eucharist. Gratitude. Thanksgiving.⁴

Friends, our gracious and loving God has created a world of *abundance*, but we humans have imposed social structures of *scarcity*. In the developed world, in recent decades, we’ve come to call this *income inequality*; the trend in which the wealthy continue to thrive, and middle-class incomes have remained flat and social mobility stagnates.

French economist Thomas Picketty provided a stark formula for what happens when capitalism is left unregulated in his 2015 bestseller, *Capital in the Twenty-First Century*. It goes like this: when the rate of return on the investments of the wealthy exceeds the rate of growth in the overall economy, the rich get exponentially richer while everyone becomes poorer. In more sensible times, like the decades following WWII, that rule was mitigated by an American

³ Richard Rohr, “*God Is Everywhere*,” Center for Action and Contemplation, July 27, 2018

⁴ Diana Butler Bass, “*Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks*,” Harper One, New York, 2018, pp. 120, 121

government that forced the rich pay their share of taxes, curbed the worst predations of businesses, and saw to it that roads, bridges, public transit, and schools were built and maintained.

But that's all a fading memory. Under the influence of political money, politicians no longer seek a unified economy and society where the middle class can flourish. The U.S. is the richest and also the most unequal country in the world, featuring the largest wealth inequality gap of the two hundred countries in the Global Wealth Report of 2015.⁵

The economy is an act of human beings—not of God. When we start to learn that God is everywhere and in everyone and in everything, **then** we might build a world based on: Community. Reciprocity. Overcoming boundaries. Eating together. Hospitality.

Amen.

⁵ Lynne Parramore, *"America's White Collar Middle Class Takes a Terrifying Slide Down the Mobility Ladder,"*
Institute for New Economic Thinking, July 25, 2018