

Abundance in the Midst of Scarcity¹

I'm struck by how this incident in Jesus' ministry arises in the midst of much emptiness or lack. Beginning with Jesus. Jesus has just learned that his cousin and forerunner, John the Baptist, was needlessly and cruelly murdered. His death is disgusting. King Herod, drunk, wants to impress friends at his birthday party. Suddenly the greatest man in generations is dead.

Jesus knows deeply that he will meet the same end. In his inner grief and distress, Jesus needs to get away in order to pull himself together. But we read that the crowd isn't interested in Jesus' peace of mind. They have their own struggles and won't let him alone.

We read that they bring their sick. Think of that scene. The old, deformed, demented, hanging onto their friends or carried on stretchers are all along in order to be close to Jesus. This is no pretty crowd like the audience at a symphony concert in Atlanta.

There is a pervasive sense of neediness that this crowd brings. They are lost in life, poor, confused, unsophisticated. For them, if there is any hope, it's in Jesus. This one, they feel, this one knows the way. And so they come desperately to him.

¹Douglas DeCelle preached this sermon at the First Presbyterian Church in LaGrange, Ga. 30240.

At length, they all get hungry. Meal time comes relentlessly. So, in addition to the other forms of emptiness, they also could use a good meal.

It's interesting that we're reading this story during a time in our own situation when we're thinking about our own scarcity. Several of you, and I agree with you, have talked about how nervous these days seem. We know about the gas and mortgage crises and downturn in much of the economy. Household budgets are tight. It appears that Americans are not happy with the course our society has taken and are looking for new directions during this political season.

Perhaps as I talk you're thinking of circumstances in your own life where things are tight. Not enough time; not enough support from people you'd expect to be backing you up; not enough compassion; not enough heart-to-heart conversation, not enough volunteers, not enough love.

If this sense of scarcity rings true with you, you'll be interested in seeing what Jesus does and where this story goes.

Put simply, Jesus is not parallelized by the neediness all around and within himself. As we all know, the need and the hunger of those people is met. They're all fed a good, simple meal. And there are leftovers.

What happened? One thing that didn't happen was Jesus single-handedly solving the problem out of his own powers. Jesus doesn't come off in this story as the great magician or spiritual giant who took over and touched the bread and uttered a secret formula and "kaboom" there's a thousand loaves.

Jesus instead tells his disciples to distribute the existing food. "You give them something to eat." Frankly we see no particular miracle. The disciples simply hand the bread into the crowd. Somehow in the breaking and passing there comes to be enough for everyone. We're left with no image of how the miracle happened.

That may not be important. What is important is that Jesus was onto something that I and we tend to miss. Namely, that there is something kind, abundant, and God-saturated about the world that permits wonderful things to happen when we think such things are out of the question.

There's a scene in a novel by Vladimir Nabakov where one of the characters is watching someone give an old woman a cup of coffee. Suddenly it dawns on the character that the world is not a grim, depressing place. It holds enormous tenderness, it's not all struggle. We only think it is. What it really is is shimmering joy. Full of benefits. A grace given to us and not fully appreciated.

The day after our daughter, Kim was born; I was traveling back and forth between our home and the hospital. I stopped into a McDonalds. I was standing in one of the crowded lunch rush lines that extend from the registers. When I reached the front the employee asked: "Did your wife have her baby?" I said, "Yes, it was yesterday, a little girl." With that all of the customers stepped out of their lines and shook my hand and said, "Congratulations."

I believe I got a glimpse in that moment of humanity and grace of the world that Jesus always saw. Didn't he come to announce that something about the world had changed? "The Kingdom of God is at hand. Change your mind."

So when the disciples come to Jesus wanting to get rid of the crowd and their crying babies and unwashed sick relatives, he says, "give them something to eat." In Jesus' God-saturated world giving them something to eat was the obvious thing to do. In Jesus' world which is our world too, two little fish and five loaves of bread can feed a ball park of people.

Now, let's not play games with this. If you and I really want to let ourselves be confronted by this portion of the Word of God, we'll hear it speaking to us the same message that Jesus spoke to the original disciples. "The world is far more

wonderful than you have told yourselves it is. There will be enough. You give them something to eat."

I see this speaking to many of our dilemmas within this congregation. We know about shortages. Not enough volunteers. Money won't be there. No one will come. And in view of our sense of scarcity we pull back or don't launch something new.

I really appreciate our Christian educators who looked at declining attendance of school age children at summer Sunday school. What they did was to invest more energy to create an elaborate, fun, hands on experience, "Vacation in God's Creation," that takes a learning field trip each week. It's been gloriously successful.

I see this speaking to our individual lives. Maybe we've missed how generous and full of possibilities this world is. Maybe Jesus is telling us that we've got to change our minds about what we think is inevitable. I know it's hard to give or our selves when we feel we don't have enough for our own needs. Maybe we have more of what people need than we think.

Years ago, a young woman, about a year after her marriage received a cancer diagnosis that threatened her ability to have children. Many friends contacted her out of deep concern. She noticed something unexpected, as she talked with friends. She realized that she was giving support to them more than receiving

it from them. In an odd way the uncertainty, the sadness and fear of her disease also possessed a grace and abundance that was healing for friends.

By the way, did you happen to notice as we read the story of the feeding of the 5000, that Jesus handles the bread long enough to take, bless, break, and give. Now these four words—take, bless, break, and give—are Eucharistic actions which are repeated in the Bible in connection with the Lord's Supper. This scene isn't the Lord's Supper. But it is an instance of one miracle embedded in an even greater miracle that is unfolding. Jesus Christ, who is the bread of life, will be taken, blessed, broken, and given to sufficiently fill and heal the brokenness of the whole world.

As disciples of Jesus Christ, you and I are being introduced to a wonderful grace and sufficiency that has broken into the world. This is not the hard-bitten, tough, chance world that we may think it is. The Kingdom of God is at hand. We're the ones who still give--even in times of scarcity--them something to eat.