

Sunday, July 29 and Wednesday, August 2 + 9th week after Pentecost

John 6:1-21: “An Attitude of Abundance”

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The feeding of the 5,000 is the only miracle of Jesus’ that is told in all four Gospels. It’s so well known to us and to our children that we tend to take it for granted. But sometimes it takes an experience in life to bring these familiar stories to life in a new way. That happened for me on Friday after all the excitement of our monthly Second Harvest mobile food pantry.

First, let’s look at the Gospel reading again. We are at the same point in Jesus’ ministry as we were last week in Mark: Word of Jesus’ miracles is spreading like wildfire. Massive crowds are seeking him wherever he goes. So just as Jesus did in Mark, he takes his disciples to a remote place to rest awhile—in this case, up the mountain.

Even up there, they hardly have time to catch their breath before they’re discovered. In the distance Jesus spots the mass of people advancing toward them like a human lava flow. They are excited, all worked up, and have been following him around for hours or days. They probably haven’t eaten for a while. Jesus knows what he is about to do, but he decides to use this as a teaching moment. He wonders aloud to Philip, “Where are we going to buy bread for these people to eat?”

The key piece to take note of is Philip's response to Jesus' question. "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to have a little!", Philip shoots back. In other words, Impossible—there will never be enough, no matter what we do. If we could feed them, they might calm down. But there's no way. We're sunk.

Philip is providing a textbook example of what is called the scarcity mindset. This is a way of thinking shaped by fear that there will never be enough to go around. Not to say this is true of Philip, but people who live out of the scarcity mindset are stingy. They are hoarders. They don't share. They lack compassion. They are pushy. They always want to be at the head of the line. They resent competition, because they think it makes them look weaker. They try to get by with less than is expected of them. They think small, and they avoid taking risks.

You may remember the parable of the talents, in which the master gives each worker a certain amount of money, or a talent, to invest while he is away. The scarcity thinker buries it in the ground for fear of losing it, while the others are creative, come up with ways to put their talents to work in the world, and multiply five- and ten-fold what their master had entrusted to them.

More specifically, people who live out of a mindset of scarcity find themselves competing for resources, even when they are available in abundance. Those of you who have volunteered for Second Harvest, does this ring a bell?

When I arrived here seven months ago, I discovered a lot of people were unhappy with our existing system for getting people in the door. They were supposed to sign in, get a number, and then stand in line in that order until they were let into the hall starting at 2 p.m. But started getting here as early as 9 a.m., in the hopes of getting a lower number so they could be among the first into the hall. Although this was disruptive to workers and office staff, to accommodate them lots of chairs were set up in the narthex. But this only made it worse. Arguments broke out about who had come before whom, since there wasn't really a way to tell based on where they were sitting. People ended up being packed here for hours, or outside in the heat or cold, before the handing out of numbers officially began. Tempers flared. Bad language was heard. Once a fight even broke out in the narthex. The climate was one of anxiety and stress.

These people were living out of a scarcity mindset, one driven by fear. They were afraid there wouldn't be enough. That the food would run out. That they'd be shortchanged, or cheated, by others who pushed their way in front of them.

The truth is that there is always so much food to distribute from Second Harvest that everyone has access to the same items in the same quantities, no matter what their number, unless they came after 4:30. But scarcity thinking kept trumping common sense.

In the midst of this same scenario last month, we decided to institute a new system. Numbers would be handed out beginning at noon, but the church doors would

open to the public only at 2 p.m. So I went around telling all those who were waiting for registration that, from now on, after getting their number they could do whatever they wanted until the church doors opened. They could go home, or whatever, and come back at 2 or even later and their place in line would be secure. They didn't have to be there to hold it, since they already had their number.

My role model was Southwest Airlines, which is famous for its open seating. Exactly 24 hours before departure you can go online and get a boarding number. When the plane is ready to board everyone lines up according to their number. Until that moment you can go off and do whatever you want. People are always friendly and accommodating, even if you get back to the gate only at the last minute. "What's your number?" you ask someone as you hurry in. "Oh, you're 32? I'm 31." "OK," the person says, stepping back to let you in. "Just get in front of me." It's super low-key. I always think, "If only everything in the world worked like this."

When I announced our new policy last month, I braced for negative pushback. But guess what? People burst into applause! They were nodding, and smiling, and saying, "Thank you, this was really needed, something had to be done." As it turned out, most of them were as upset as we were about the pushing and shoving and the tempers and the fights. I went around telling them that they didn't even have to get here early get a good number. All the numbers are good, because there is enough for all.

Friday was the first day to try out the new system. Everything went beautifully. There were many appreciative comments, although it didn't hurt that it was a gorgeous day to be outside. At noon as people gathered outside the side door, we began to hand out numbers. By 2 p.m. about a hundred people were registered, so that when the door opened they went right into the distribution line. I invited them in by groups of 20 just like they do at Southwest. It was truly amazing to look around and see so many smiling, happy faces. There are still kinks to work out, but I think the scarcity mindset is beginning to break down.

Back in our Gospel reading, Andrew is also guilty of scarcity thinking. He is the one who notices the boy with five barley loaves and two fish and then says, "But what are they among so many people?" Yet, as we know, Jesus then takes this humble offering. After blessing it, not only is there enough for all, but there's a lot left over.

Doesn't our faith often mirror that of Philip and Andrew, who could not see past the six months' wages or the meager five loaves and two fish? As a church, aren't we perhaps accustomed to living out of scarcity rather than abundance? We save, and worry, and fundraise for ourselves, and go about our business as usual. To be honest, much of the time we can barely pay our bills, although we *are* paying them.

But aren't we consistently burying our talent, meaning all with which God has entrusted to us, because we're afraid of losing it? You know, when I consider this beautiful building, and the amazing variety of gifts within this congregation, it takes my

breath away. But we tend to pull back when we should push forward. We give in to our fear of shortfall, rather than allowing ourselves to be carried to new and exciting places by God's abundance. In this congregation, we really do have more than enough of whatever we need for whatever we want to do.

Jesus' blessing the loaves and fishes shows us what it is like to live out of an attitude of abundance. Philip and Andrew were playing it safe. Hey, they probably thought, those people had no right to expect they were going to be fed, anyway. But Christians are called to step out of their fear and embrace the abundance of God's love and mercy, the abundance of Christ's compassion and forgiveness, and the abundance of hope that comes through the power of the Holy Spirit.

Everything that we have, we have received from God, every little thing. God is calling us to recognize that and then invest it for the sake of the world. Where might that lead us? Let's open our hearts to an attitude of abundance, and see what God can do through us.

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