

God of Abundance

Philippians 4: 8-9

Matthew 15: 32-38

Today, we are living during a time of recession and we often hear people talking about how there is not enough. If we turn on the television or if we sit down for coffee in the local café, we will hear the same theme. Many of us feel there is just not enough. There is not enough time, we don't get enough out of our jobs, our spouse doesn't do enough of the chores, we don't have enough resources, we don't have enough to retire. We may hear similar conversations in the fellowship halls of mainline churches...there are not enough people coming to church, young people are not as interested in church. We don't have enough money to hire a youth minister. What if the air-conditioner gives out? How will we pay for it?

This tendency to think we do not have enough is the scarcity model. It's essentially the belief that we do not have enough. This belief is coupled with the idea that by accumulating more things we will be happier. The television is constantly telling us we need that car, we need those Tommy Hilfiger jeans, we need that divers watch that can be submerged 500 feet under water, we need that vacation in Tahiti. The media is constantly telling us we need more. We need more beauty, more technology, more style, a bigger house, more time saving devices, and more getaway adventures. The basic idea is that if we only had more we would be happier.

The scarcity model extends to the mainline church. Everywhere we turn, mainline churches are declining in membership and attendance.

We may ask, has God abandoned our churches and left us with not enough?

It is at this point that our scripture wakes us up from this fog—our scripture wakes us up from this trance of scarcity and reminds us again and again that our God is in fact a God of abundance. And our God does provide.

In our second scripture this morning Jesus doesn't want to send the crowd away hungry. So Jesus asks the disciples to feed the crowd. And they ask the obvious question, "Where are we to get enough bread in the desert to feed so great a crowd?"

This is the classic response of the scarcity model: "We don't have enough, where are we going to get it, I just don't see it. It's not going to work." In other words the disciples are saying, "Jesus, the glass is half empty, the food isn't there, there's no way to get it here in the desert."

Jesus, on the other hand says the glass is half full.” He focuses on what is there to work with, not on what is lacking. Jesus asks the disciples the question, “How many loaves and fishes do we have?”

This is a complete shift. The question is not, “Where is the lack?” Rather the question is “What tools do we have to work with.”

I have an observation about children. I have noticed that in the West if a child doesn’t have toys in the toy box, he or she usually has a hard time coming up with games to play. But in poor countries where I have lived children make do with whatever is there. They find games to play in their surroundings. In other words attitude is everything. If we look close enough, a cloths hanger can become a wheel; washers, nuts, bolts, and some cardboard can become a game of checkers. If a toy box is empty a western child might say: “Daddy, there are no toys in the toy box. I’m bored.” A poor child, on the other hand will say “I know there are no toys but what do we have to play with? Do we have a hanger? Do we have any nuts, bolts, washers? Do we have any loaves or fishes to work with?”

Let’s think about a paperclip for a minute. How many applications can you think of for a paperclip? Well, a friend told me about a business conference he attended in Denver. At this conference two teams of engineers were asked to get together for half an hour in separate rooms and to list all the applications they could think of for a paper clip. After the half hour passed, one team thought they had done an awesome job. They came up with 50 possible applications for a paperclip. Well, then the shocker came. The other team came up with over 200 applications for the paperclip. What was the difference between the two teams of engineers? Well, the second team assumed that they could melt down the paperclip and melting down the paperclip infinitely increased the possible applications.

Who ever said you have to leave the paperclip as is? You’re an engineer. You can melt it down. Sure! Be creative, think outside the box. The only option in the disciples’ minds for feeding the crowd was “go to the store with money and buy bread.” They didn’t take into account that they were with Jesus. And when Jesus is around, miracles are possible. Sometimes we limit ourselves by limiting our options and creativity. We confine ourselves to that mindset, “there is not enough bread, we are out of options.”

It’s easy to fall into the scarcity model of thinking and ask along with the disciples, “How on earth are we going to feed all these people. There is no food in the desert. It would take a year’s wages to feed all these people. We are up a creek without a paddle.” But the disciples have it all wrong. The song is not “Count your shortcoming, count them one by one.” It’s “Count your blessings, count them one by one.” Sure there are tough things in our histories and in our life and in our relationships and in our jobs. Corporate downsizing and people failing on their mortgage payments is a sobering reality that many are faced with today.

It is easy to recall all the things that are lacking in our relationships, in our lives, in our job, et cetera. Every person, every relationship, every job, and every wall of our house has its down side. On any given day we could think of ten reasons not to get out of bed. On any given day we could also think of all we have to be thankful for, compared to most in the world.

So there are two roads. One is thinking inside the box and asking "How on God's earth are we going to feed all these people." The other is thinking outside the box, looking at all the options, then asking "How many loaves and fishes do we have?" This difference in approach makes all the difference.

Our passage in Philippians says "whatever is true, whatever is pure, whatever is pleasing, whatever is good...if there is any excellence and if there is anything worthy of praise, think and meditate about these things."

The United Church of Christ is losing numbers, but we are also growing. Recently I saw a UCC conference video where the President of the UCC reported a six thousand member African-American church in Atlanta that recently joined our denomination.

On any given day we can focus on scarcity or abundance. It's our choice. What choice will we make? Do we really believe in a God of abundance or are we afflicted by the scarcity model?

A business woman was on a weeklong Business conference in Seattle, Washington. She was in charge of a convention, which kept her up all hours of the night checking up on last minute logistics, verifying room reservations, and booking flights. Her hotel conference room was littered with spread sheets, name tags, and pay stubs. And, after days of go-go-go, she was completely exhausted.

When she got to the airport she passed a cookie store. Usually she would walk right past it. But, this time she thought to herself, "After all I have been through I deserve a few cookies." So she went into the store and got four chocolate chip cookies, her favorite.

Then she plopped herself down in a chair to wait for her flight. Then the unthinkable happened... A teenager with spiky hair and a skateboard in hand, dipped his hand into her bag of cookies and began to eat one, without so much as a word. The audacity of this kid! She couldn't believe it. After all she had been through she was looking forward to this one treat, and this teenager ate her cookie! She was about to let him have it. Then she restrained herself and held her tongue. Instead, she reached in the bag and took a cookie. While she was savoring her cookie this kid took another one out of her bag and this time he was smiling at her while he was taking her cookie! Of all the nerve! What was up with this punk? By this time she was boiling over and she was about to read him the riot act. Then her row of seats on the plane was called and even the energy to give this teen a piece of her mind drained away. At that point she just got up, took her last remaining

cookie, and shuffled into line. She was completely fed up with the entire week and with this final chapter of rudeness and she was so exhausted she could barely keep her eyelids open.

When she finally got to her plane seat, she sat down and took a few deep breaths. Then she reached into her bag to get her travel pillow so she could get some much needed sleep.

It was then that she touched a paper bag and heard it crinkle. What in the world! She looked into the bag in disbelief. There in her travel bag was her bag of cookies? She opened the bag. All the cookies were there, every last one! In her exhausted state she forgot that she had put the cookies in her bag. It was she who was taking the teens cookies, not the other way around. And it was the teen who smiled while she ate his cookies.

She didn't see the generosity of the young man...sharing his last cookie with her...her eyes were closed to his kindness.

God calls us to believe in abundance, to believe in the power of the Spirit, to believe that the church can be as alive now as in the time of the Apostles.

Our scripture does not say whatever is lacking, whatever is a problem, whatever is painful, whatever is not there—meditate on these things.

Our scripture does say whatever is true, wherever the spirit is moving, whatever is amazing, meditate on these things. And the Bible is filled with stories of thinking outside the box and with stories of abundance...the feeding of the five thousand...turning water into wine...the miraculous healing... These are all stories of abundance!

May each of us in our own way unlearn scarcity and open our eyes to the blessings before us and the abundance around us.

Every person sitting here today has so much to be thankful for and every church in our conference has what it needs to thrive. When we focus on what we do have and what is there before our eyes it changes everything.

God will provide what we need to thrive.

Today I celebrate that our God is a God of abundance.

Today I celebrate 200 applications for the paper clip and games made out of nuts, bolts, and washers.

Today I celebrate spiky haired teens with skateboards.

I celebrate the full bag of chocolate chip cookies.

Today I celebrate our scripture when ten thousand women, men, and children were fed and seven basketfuls were picked up. All from seven loaves of bread and a few fish!

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Will the people say amen!

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