

July 25, 2021
“More Than Enough”
2 Kings 4:42-44, John 6:1-21
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One of my favorite verses in the Bible comes from John’s gospel, though not from our reading this morning: “The thief comes only to steal and kill and destroy. I came that they may have life, and have it abundantly.” Or as some translations put it, “. . . and have it to the full.” That’s John chapter 10, verse 10.

Shared within a broader description of Jesus as the “good shepherd,” it’s a simple reminder for me of what I understand as Jesus’s essential ministry – and so ours, as those who purport to follow in his footsteps. Striving toward abundant life. Life to the full, for all.

Apart from the Resurrection itself, there is only one miracle recorded in all four gospels. And it’s safe to say that if every gospel writer considered it significant enough to include, it must be REALLY important! Recalling and echoing Elisha’s miraculous feeding from our first reading, the so-called “Feeding of the Five Thousand” – as Terry also read for us – is that miracle. And make no mistake, it is a miracle of abundance.

John’s account, like so much of the gospel as a whole, is notably different from the earlier synoptic gospels – Matthew, Mark and Luke. I’ve said it before and I say it again: Which one of these is not like the others?

In John, large crowds are following Jesus because they’ve already seen “signs” that he may be the one they’ve been waiting for. The prophet, the messianic king, that many Jews believed was coming; and within the historical context of first-century Palestine, specifically coming to free them from the oppression of Roman occupation.

The signs they’ve seen, according to John, are miracles of healing. Jesus healing the sick, including on the Sabbath.

In the other gospel accounts, it is Jesus’s disciples who initiate the operative response to the crowds. In Matthew, Mark and Luke, after Jesus engages the people as teacher, healer or both, his disciples say more or less the same thing, “This is a deserted place,

and the hour is now late; send the crowd away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves." They've had it with the crowds.

But in John's account, it's Jesus who initiates the response in question. He says to Philip, one of the twelve, "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?" Understand here that nobody has said anything about feeding the crowd, so Jesus is planting a seed – and yes, this is a set-up. We're told that Jesus already knew what he was gonna do, and so we're also told that Jesus, teacher that he is, is testing his disciples with this prompting question.

There is a RIGHT answer, and Philip gets it wrong: "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." We can't do it. We can't possibly buy enough bread for these people to eat. End of discussion.

You could say that Philip is operating within a paradigm of scarcity, conceding to the harsh and unjust social and political reality of the day that left so many poor and hungry. There's simply not enough to go around. And so as the other gospel accounts have it, there's nothing they can do but send the people back to the surrounding villages and fend for themselves.

But this is a group discussion. We learn more, we learn better, in groups, amen?!

Philip is just the first to respond to Jesus's question. Andrew's initial response gets us closer to the lesson to be learned here, closer to the heart of the matter: "There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish." It is a meager, but what turns out to be mighty, insight.

This may be a bit of an overreach on my part, but it strikes me that Andrew is demonstrating one of the core principles of grassroots community organizing and development, straight out of Saul Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals*: that solutions for community problems, that social change, emerges most powerfully and sustainably from within the impacted communities themselves. In practice, that can take the form of what's become known as asset mapping. Community's identifying and accessing their own, existing strengths, resources and capacity to address a problem or injustice.

And then grounding the solution in their own leadership and power, not outside their community, to ultimately confront the roots causes of the problem or injustice. As John McKnight, one of the founders of asset-based community development, suggests, “How can you possibly know what you need until you figure out what you have?”

So Andrew helps identify what the people have, but even he doesn't believe it can begin to touch the need. You can picture him tentatively raising his hand following Philip's response, sharing his observation about the boy – but then immediately second-guessing himself. “There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?” What are they among so many people? Think about it. In the midst of a crowd of thousands, who cares about five loaves of bread and two fish?!

Well, Jesus does, for one. And again, consummate teacher that he is, Jesus answers Andrew's question by SHOWING rather than TELLING. “Make the people sit down,” he says, and let me SHOW you what five loaves and two fish are among so many people. Let me SHOW you how something so small, so seemingly insignificant, can make all the difference in the world. Think of the loaves and the fish as a mustard seed. This, friends, is a paradigm of community empowerment—a paradigm not based on scarcity, but abundance.

The rest of the story is familiar because all four gospels provide the same basic details. It's the story you've heard a hundred times before if you've spent any part of your life in the church, in Sunday School. When everyone is seated, Jesus takes the loaves and the fish. He gives thanks – and here, in the original Greek, is the word for thanksgiving from which we get 'Eucharist.' And then he spreads the unexpected, surprising wealth. “As much as they wanted,” we're told. Until “they were satisfied,” we're told.

And with that the narrative takes us, and Jesus takes us, on a journey from scarcity to satisfaction. Sufficiency. From 'not even close to enough' to 'enough.'

But with that, I don't think we've arrived yet at the heart of the story. 'Enough' would be a pretty good ending under the circumstances, but there's more.

Jesus has the disciples gather up the fragments, and they end up with 12 baskets. Twelve baskets! All four gospels confirm the same amount. Twelve baskets of bread crumbs and broken pieces of fish. The deeper lesson here, the lesson Jesus is getting at with this test, is found in those baskets. In the fragments, the leftovers, the broken pieces.

We don't know how big the baskets are, but it doesn't matter. Beyond the miraculous feeding itself, we are meant to register how extraordinary it is that, among a crowd of thousands, there are 12 baskets left over from what began with one little boy, five loaves and two fish. The miracle extends further. The narrative journey has already moved us from a paradigm of 'not enough' to 'enough' – and so now from 'enough' to 'MORE than enough.' More than enough! Abundance.

And to appreciate that piece of the story we have to appreciate the fact that Jesus bothers to collect the leftovers in the first place! I mean, everyone's been fed and satisfied. He's already accomplished what he wanted, right? Why bother?

This is not just Jesus the miracle worker, but Jesus the radical. Through the lens of our consumerist, capitalist culture, where abundance is disposable, where inequality is justified as the inevitable consequence of individual failures and deficits, where the myth of scarcity serves to fuel our personal, social, economic and political insecurities and fears, consider just how radical it is that Jesus takes time to mind the leftovers. That, for me, is the lesson. That is the heart of the story.

Abundance of body – and for that matter, abundance of mind and spirit and therefore life as a whole – requires that nothing be wasted. That no thing and no one be wasted or thrown away.

As Anglican priest Rachel Mann writes, "Jesus invites us to gather up the fragments. For it is part of the nature of broken bread that fragments will fall. Yet, at heart of Jesus' economy is the desire that nothing that matters – that might actually feed us – should be lost. . . . I'm not even sure we know anymore what truly feeds us. Our culture is thrilled with its capacity to consume and generate vast wealth for the few while pushing

increasing numbers towards the food bank. Fragments of humanity and love are seemingly being lost."

For Jan Richardson, the gathered fragments are a sign of the sometimes hidden wholeness and abundance that Jesus came to reveal. She offers her *Blessing the Fragments*:

Cup your hands together,
and you will see the shape
this blessing wants to take.
Basket, bowl, vessel:
it cannot help but
hold itself open
to welcome
what comes.

This blessing
knows the secret
of the fragments
that find their way
into its keeping,
the wholeness
that may hide
in what has been
left behind,
the persistence of plenty
where there seemed
only lack.

Look into the hollows
of your hands
and ask
what wants to be
gathered there,
what abundance waits
among the scraps
that come to you,
what feast
will offer itself
from the fragments
that remain.

It shouldn't surprise us that the people who enjoyed this miraculous feast took it as another sign. A sure sign, in fact, because it was enough to confirm for some of them

that Jesus was indeed the one they'd been waiting for. John's text goes on to tell us that they were about to take him by force and MAKE him king, that's how strongly they felt. But Jesus wanted no part of that. He was not looking to be the kind of king they had in mind.

In fact, I see Jesus in this all-too-familiar story trying instead to point the spotlight back on the people. Imploring them, including but not limited to the disciples, to consider that they are the ones they've been waiting for. Together, in shared community, they are the ones they've been waiting for to make abundance possible.

The world God created and is constantly, miraculously recreating with us already has more than enough to go around, more than enough bread – literally and metaphorically – to go around. But that is a truth realized only if and when we – in our individual and collective power – open our eyes and our hearts to embrace the divine promise of abundance, what Jan Richardson calls the “persistence of plenty.” Only if and when we stop conceding to voices and structures that dictate otherwise. Stop looking outside ourselves and our communities for the personal and social change we seek. And reject and confront the myth of scarcity so forcefully promoted by the prevailing social, economic and political powers that be.

What difference would it make in your life, in the lives of those around you, in the world, IF your starting point was abundance rather than scarcity? What difference does it make WHEN your starting point is abundance rather than scarcity?

Friends, we are the ones we've been waiting for. Knowing what we have ALREADY helps us clarify what we need in our pursuit of abundant life. Jesus reminds us as much, and he reminds us that a world of abundance – where there is always more than enough, where nothing is wasted – is closer than we think.

May it be so.