

The Dangerous Myth of Scarcity

Scripture: John 6: 1-14

Next week the confirmation class is doing a lesson where they talk about stuff. Pastor Nick has designed a curriculum where they can talk about their things, their clothes, their phones, their space. The lesson is coordinated with the Alternative Christmas Market and Pastor Nick is going to give the class an opportunity to shop at the Fair and really consider what their options are for Christmas giving and make their own decisions. The whole exercise is designed to help the Confirmation Class consider – how much stuff do we need? Which things in life make you happy? How much stuff can we afford? When do you have enough?

Those are life-long questions. What kind of phone do we want or need? What kind of vehicle do we expect to drive. What kind of neighborhood can we afford? How much do we need to retire? How much is enough?

That's the same question at the heart of today's Bible story. Jesus's reputation as a healer has grown. He draws huge crowds and here we find him surrounded by 5,000 people. They don't leave. When he goes up a mountain, they follow. Before long, as the day progresses, the disciples grow nervous about how to feed all these people. Then they find a young boy with five barley loaves and two fish this youth is willing to share. To their surprise, his small lunch is enough. It's more than enough; the scraps from the meal fill twelve baskets. How did this happen? What is going on and what can we learn? Let's take a closer look.

In the first place, the story says, start with gratitude. As the disciples gather to assess the food shortage, that day, all they can come up with are 5 barley loaves and two small fish. Its woefully inadequate. It's a joke, really. But Jesus takes the offering seriously. He invites the people to be seated, and signals that it's time to pray. Then he gives thanks for this kid's lunch. Its counter intuitive. A more honest prayer might be, "O God, what am I supposed to do with all these hungry people you have sent me? But no, Jesus thanks God for what he's got. It's paltry but Christ sees the gift in it. It's such a small amount to feed so many. It's not like the glass is half-full. The glass only has a few drops. But when you stop being focused on what you lack and see what you have, your whole attitude shifts. You step back from the fear about scarcity and look for abundance. You open the door for a miracle.

Apparently, people used gratitude in the COVID 19 pandemic. In a time when we had lost so much - the ability to go to school and work, to see friends to worship, to live normally, the people who started each day with a prayer or word of gratitude did better. Gratitude became a survival tool in the midst of the pandemic. As they listed their thanksgivings, they savored the day more deeply. This practice made them more resourceful, motivating them to expand their friendships on the phone or FaceTime or Zoom because they began to cherish their simple pleasures, more. How does this simple thing shift your approach to life? Scientists have studied gratitude. Diana Butler Bass writes about it in her book Grateful. Gratitude promotes regular heart rhythms, rebalances hormones, reduces stress, increases relaxation and even a healthier immune response. Gratitude is linked to lower levels of anxiety, less depression, fewer panic attacks or phobias, reduced reliance on alcohol, or substance abuse. {Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks {p. 29] People who practice gratitude experience less envy, better willpower, self-esteem, better athletic and academic performance, and stronger relationships. They have better memories of the

past. When you see the research on gratitude you wonder why doctors don't prescribe it as an all-purpose elixir, a super drug.

When you are upset, research shows, and you stop as Jesus did, and stop focusing on what you lack and start to inventory your resources, you put your blessings top of mind. Suddenly, you change. The problem may still be there, but you face it very differently. Starting with gratitude makes all the difference.

Secondly, we already have what we need. Jesus helped his followers to learn an important lesson that day. They already had what they needed. Jesus told them that they did not need catering trucks, or a pizza delivery. They already had what they needed. Their gifts could be multiplied. One of the gifts of the pandemic was that in a time of deprivation, people made fun, created new community, enjoyed their families in new ways. In the end it was not the things people had lost that made the most difference, but hymn singing on porches in Europe, the new neighbors next door people discovered, the miracles of spirit that got us through. The myth of scarcity comes from people who forget the gifts they already have.

Elie Wiesel survived the Holocaust and talked about it with Oprah Winfrey. She asked him, "Despite all you have seen, do you still feel grateful?" Wiesel replied, "Right after the war I went to talk to people about how grateful I was to be alive and to be human., To this day the words most often on my lips are thank you. When a person doesn't have gratitude, something is missing in his or her humanity." He is not talking about material goods or the gift of survival, but we should learn to treasure the gift of life, not what we have but that we are." {Bass, Grateful, p. 44}

Finally, the story says, we are more inter-connected than we realize. Bible scholars are not sure what happened that day. Some see it as a true catering miracle. Jesus took a small amount of food -five small loaves and two fish – and turned it into a feast for thousands of people. But other scholars think something else happened which was no less miraculous. It's unlikely, they argue, that 5,000 people went that far into the wilderness without any provisions at all. Everyone in that crowd might well have had their own stash of pita bread, olives figs or fish, in a sack or pocket. But no one was willing to share. They were guarded about their own stuff and nervous there'd never be enough. Maybe the miracle on that hill was that one boy was generous. Maybe the miracle was that his gift inspired the others to stop hoarding their food, to sit down in circles to break bread. Maybe the miracle was that his generosity turned this crowd into a community. That boy's gift in that moment was a gift that kept on giving. The miracle on that Galilean hillside was the way strangers found a common purpose. Folks who had all found their way to Jesus, suddenly became his followers, his new disciples. They were connected.

Robin Wall Kimmerer is a scientist and author of indigenous wisdom. She wrote the bestseller-Braiding Sweetgrass, a book full of native wisdom that we all need today. Kimmerer spoke at Chautauqua this summer. When she began her speech, it was an opening that got your attention. She told the audience how grateful she was for the billions of cells in her gut and how they affect her brain's function. She said she was thankful that her bones got minerals from the soil and her energy came from carbon, on loan from the food she had eaten. When she breathes in and out, Kimmerer told folks she was grateful for photosynthesis because plants create oxygen and her carbon dioxide when expelled supported the earth's vegetation. In her explanation, she said that conscious breathing dissolves the artificial boundaries we set up that make us feel dis-connected from each other and from creation.

As we face the challenges of our time, climate change, the war in Ukraine, international pandemics, none of these problems respect the artificial borders we set up. So, it will be tempting to act like the crowd on the hill with Jesus, to tell ourselves we'll never make it if we share. It will be tempting to think that there is not enough to go around, and our survival will depend on hoarding our resources. Nothing could be farther from the truth. Scientists tell us we have enough resources, but we have a distribution problem. Our world needs this story more than ever here in 2022. We need to stop feeding the myth of scarcity and see how we are connected to one another and to all of creation. We need to share solutions to the common problems of this earth, to share medical advances freely because it's the only way to invest in a healthy planet, to listen to each other's needs and ideas and to build common purpose. Then lo and behold we may discover that God has given us plenty, all we need and more.

Sermon preached by Rev. Dr. Susan Cartmell at First Congregational United Church of Christ, Appleton, Wisconsin
on Sunday, November 6, 2022 at 9:30 AM