

Title: Enough is Enough
Text: John 6: 1 – 14
Date: July 29, 2018

Just so you know where I am heading this morning, I am going to be exploring notions of scarcity and abundance, and how our perceptions are changed by the lens that we look through. Certainly this is an important topic in any era, but it seems particularly needful to consider in our era where there is a growing, polarizing disparity between the rich and the poor. It seems particularly needful to consider in our era where a perception of scarcity makes many fearful of immigrants and refugees . . . despite how much they may pay in taxes.

Since sometimes things are seen most clearly outside of our own cultural context, let me share a couple of stories from my time in Papua New Guinea. From any measurable standard, the people I lived with in the village of Waritzian were dirt poor. Though subsistence farmers, and occasional hunters, I don't remember any talk where they were bemoaning their place in life. They got by, and looking out for one another was the way it was. There was a pot luck lunch every Sunday after worship that was served in clay pots of their own making. Though many pots were laid out, I can't say there was a lot of diversity on the menu. For the most part it was a choice of boiled bananas, or boiled *kow kow* – an edible root. I should add that they were boiled in coconut milk. I place one of their homemade pots in front of you now as a symbol of sufficiency. Though poor, depression was not a part of their vocabulary. Their sense of abundance was intact.

I share another story as a symbol of a culture gone awry. Have any of you heard of Cargo Cults? This was a belief system that sprung up in a few corners of PNG in the aftermath of World War II. Inspired by the seemingly endless supply of cargo – of stuff – that the Westerners were bringing in by plane, they ascribed some sort of magical thinking to this. Some built mock airplanes out of grass thatch that they then worshipped. Others built mock offices with desks where people passed things back and forth. The thinking was that if they could replicate the patterns of these Europeans, then “cargo” would magically come down from the sky for them as well. Instead of working hard, as was their custom, if they copied the Westerners who just passed paper back and forth, then the spirits would bring good fortune to them as well. Their sense of scarcity had been awakened. Perhaps this was the primitive precursor to taping a picture of your dream yacht to your refrigerator door.

So in all cultures and times there have been examples of peoples with a healthy relationship to material things, and others with a perverted relationship to material things. Unfortunately, the healthy examples are on the wane!

These themes are touched on throughout scripture. The Bible is about abundance. From the first chapters of Genesis, God not only initiates abundance – calling forth plants and fish and birds and animals – but promises continued abundance by commanding them to “**increase and multiply**” (1:22). God's generosity and faithfulness reach their climax on the sixth day, when God proclaims a sufficiency for “**everything that has the breath of life**” and declares all this “**very good**” (1:30-31).

God hears the cry of the slaves in Egypt, and sends Moses to tell Pharaoh that the God of abundance has come to free the Israelites from this ideology of scarcity. And Yahweh won't accept no for an answer.

After leaving Egypt it wasn't long before what they had left behind started to look good compared to what they faced. They left the land of scarcity thinking they would bounce into the land of abundance. Instead, they found themselves at risk in a wilderness.

Then, in this desert wilderness, bread inexplicably appears. A fine, flaky substance comes down, answering Israel's risk with a manifestation of God's faithful generosity. This bread confuses them. It overturns their conviction about scarcity and cancels their anxiety about hunger. The gift of bread transforms the wilderness. And from that point on, Israel would be ready to entertain the thought that a place of perceived scarcity may turn out to be a place of wondrous abundance.

In the New Testament, Jesus knows all about the generosity and faithfulness of God. Filled with God's generosity, Jesus went around to people suffering from scarcity – of health, of acceptance, of power, of understanding – and replaced it with a gift of abundance.

In our story this morning, Jesus notices that the people who've been listening to him have run out of food. He's been there before. Jesus knows that hunger – scarcity – isn't a one-time experience; and he isn't in the "symbolic gesture" business. He's in the generosity business, and that means being constantly alert to any mismatch between the generosity of God and the needs of the people.

Jesus has this sense of an emergency brewing. He cares about the hungry and knows something must be done. At first Jesus doesn't say anything about how the people's hunger might be satisfied. He just points out the need to Philip, and tests him by saying, "**Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?**" (6:5) Philip's mind is stuck on scarcity, and so he replies, "**Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.**" (6:7) Can you sense the resistance in his answer? It is as though he is saying, "Get real, Jesus." This is not a response that arises out of abundance.

A hint of hope comes when someone else says, "**There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?**" (6:9) Jesus has abundance on his mind, and so he says, "**Make the people sit down.**" Even the narrative creates an image of abundance when John makes a point of there being "**a great deal of grass in the place.**" It is almost as though an image on Psalm 23 is conjured up where it is written: "**The LORD is my shepherd, I shall not want. He makes me lie down in green pastures.**" This image is reinforced in the tenth chapter of John where we are told that Jesus says, "**I am the good shepherd.**" (John 10:11)

We know the story. All were fed – all were satisfied – and lots was left over. An unmistakable image of abundance and generosity.

I hope this thought is not overly "creative," but it has been pointed out that in the gospel of John there is no record of The Lord's Supper. So for those of you who are tripped up by the image of consuming the body and blood of Christ, perhaps *this* is an image you can hold on to: Jesus calling all together, without exception, inviting all to be seated in the thick grass. Jesus blessing the loaves and the fishes, sharing with all, until all are satisfied. Can you relate to that? One is reminded of the words of Mary in her Magnificat: "**He has filled the hungry with good things**" (Luke 1:53).

Jesus is well-schooled in the transformative generosity of God. He is also well-schooled in the conviction that if you share your bread with your neighbor, the world will be made new. Out in the wilderness, Jesus uses five loaves to conduct a sit-down thanksgiving dinner that matches the needs of the people with the generosity of God.

Instead of bread and wine being turned into body and blood, here it is *his actions* that are transformative. The bread stays exactly what it is – bread – yet it becomes something it never was before: a carrier of all the hidden, powerful gifts of God. The crowd stays as it is, but it

becomes something it never thought it would be: a people entitled to what they can't provide for themselves. The desert stays as it is, but it becomes something that no one would ever expect: a viable place of existence, the arena for the reign of God. Jesus has put into practice the generosity of the Creator. It is as though Genesis 1 reappears, and the world is again made new. Gifts, when they are blessed and broken and given, have immense potential. He knows that generosity isn't something you just think about. It's something you do.

Today, the fundamental human condition continues to be anxiety, fueled by a market ideology that keeps pounding on us to take more, to *not* think about our neighbor, to be fearful, shortsighted, grudging. Over and over, we're urged to be sure we have the resources to continue our affluent lifestyles, especially as we approach our "golden years."

That same market ideology powers the multinational corporations, as they roam the world, seeking the best deal, the greatest return, the cheapest labor and materials. Whether it's global policies or local poverty-wage jobs, those who fear scarcity refuse to acknowledge any abundance that extends beyond their own coffers.

Thinking of my experience in the tiny, tiny village of Waritzian in Papua New Guinea, good things happen when you really, really know we are all related, and all in this together. How quickly we forget when we grow, and become more "sophisticated."

May the church be a tool to remind us of God's original intent. When Jesus was asked which was the greatest commandment, he replied with a trick answer: **"You shall love the Lord your God with all your heart and soul and mind and strength"** and **"you shall love your neighbor as yourself."** You can't have just one! You need to have both! And the link that unites them is God's limitless generosity, acknowledged and enacted.

What if one of the links between the Creator's generosity and the neighbor's needs is us, this community? If that is not true, then scarcity rules and we are in sorry shape. But if it is, and if we believe it is, we can begin life anew as stewards of God's abundance.

Enough *is* enough!

Amen.

John 6: 1 - 14 (NRSV)

After this Jesus went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee, also called the Sea of Tiberias. ³A large crowd kept following him, because they saw the signs that he was doing for the sick. ⁴Jesus went up the mountain and sat down there with his disciples. ⁵Now the Passover, the festival of the Jews, was near. ⁶When he looked up and saw a large crowd coming toward him, Jesus said to Philip, **"Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?"** ⁷He said this to test him, for he himself knew what he was going to do. ⁸Philip answered him, **"Six months' wages⁹ would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little."** ⁹One of his disciples, Andrew, Simon Peter's brother, said to him, **"There is a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?"** ¹⁰Jesus said, **"Make the people sit down."** Now there was a great deal of grass in the place; so they¹¹ sat down, about five thousand in all. ¹²Then Jesus took the loaves, and when he had given thanks, he distributed them to those who were seated; so also the fish, as much as they wanted. ¹³When they were satisfied, he told his disciples, **"Gather up the fragments left over, so that nothing may be lost."** ¹⁴So they gathered them up, and from the fragments of the five barley loaves, left by those who had eaten, they filled twelve baskets. ¹⁵When the people saw the sign that he had done, they began to say, **"This is indeed the prophet who is to come into the world."**