

**Proper 13A – August 3, 2014**  
**Genesis 32:22-31; Psalm 17:1-7, 16; Romans 9:1-5; Matthew 14:13-21**  
**By The Rev. Kevin D. Bean**

The story of the feeding of the 5,000 shows Jesus leading his disciples and this large crowd through a public contemplative moment that cut through illusions of scarcity, revealing the reality of abundance. Jesus had attracted quite a public following in Galilee. Crowds began following him everywhere, it seemed. In today's reading, Jesus attempts to retreat to a quiet hillside with his disciples near the Sea of Galilee; but instead, his retreat is cut short by the crowds who catch up with them. And the entire series of events that follow – not just this retreat cut short – all of it is occasioned by a contemplative element; especially if we regard contemplation, as Quaker writer Parker Palmer puts it, as a way by which we *unmask illusion and reveal reality*.<sup>i</sup> Defined this way, contemplation doesn't only happen in solitude or small group experiences of tranquility and quiet. It can also occur in public ways in public places – even in very large groups such as the multitudes Jesus encounters.

Jesus operates within the reality of abundance and unmasks the illusion of scarcity. With an abundance mentality we say that there is enough for everyone, food, love, justice, knowledge...everything – if we would but acknowledge and share generously and wisely. Of course, around the world, and very close by, hunger persists for a number of reasons; and none of that is illusory or unreal, to be sure. Yet God's creation is one of abundance – therefore there is plenty to give and to share. It seems so simple; but we make it so difficult.

We live in a world where the gap between scarcity and abundance grows wider every day. Whether at the level of nations or neighborhoods, this widening gap is polarizing people, making each camp more and more suspicious and antagonistic toward the other. The issue asks whether there is enough to go around – enough food, water, shelter or land, for example. An ideology of scarcity says no, there's not enough, so hold on to what you have. In fact, don't just hold onto it; put aside more than you need, so that if you do need it, it will be there, even if others must do without; and, then, defend it at all costs. For example, where one-fifth of the world's population consumes nearly four-fifths of its food and associated resources to produce and deliver that food, this leads to the tragic conclusion that when we act on a mentality of scarcity through our prerogatives of privilege and our acquisitiveness and wastefulness, we help make scarcity a very real thing. And these are some of the roots of war.

As many have pointed out, an affirmation of abundance says the opposite: namely, appearances notwithstanding, there is enough to go around, so long as each of us takes only what we need. If we are willing to have but not hoard, there will even be more than enough left over. Two bold and well documented claims that have been made over and over again since the issuing of the United Nations' Brandt Commission Report in 1980 (and its follow-up in 2001) affirm;<sup>ii</sup> first, that there is enough food and food production in the world to feed everyone on the planet, except for the poor ways in which it is distributed to those in need. And secondly, and more revealing of our global priorities, is the fact that

one-tenth of one percent of one year's worldwide military expenditures would be enough to procure and distribute enough farm machinery and technical assistance in such a way that every part of the world could be food self-sufficient! The peculiar and ironic thing is that the people and nations with abundance more or less rely on an ideology of scarcity, while the ones suffering from scarcity more or less rely on an ideology of abundance. How can that be?

This all means that we have to look first at the abundance and scarcity we each carry within ourselves, along with the fullness and needs of our households, *and* then also account for the wealth and poverty of our societal and global community. A way to build bridges across each of these is to widen our horizons regarding God's abundance in our lives and world, as a countervailing balance to our anxiety about scarcity. With food, and beyond food, Jesus takes his disciples and a crowd of 5,000 or so through a public contemplative process of rediscovering abundance – both God's and their own. Jesus calls them to broaden their imagination and thus their options.

Who knows whether the actual miracle of the multiplication of loaves and fishes was more Jesus' overriding the conservation of matter *or* the conservation of selfish people who were at first hoarding their hidden bread? Either way, Jesus' whole approach refuses to be taken in by the disciples' pragmatic protestations that say, "What good will that do?"—protestations where their limited resources and the crowd's vast need become pretexts for inaction: "So many people, so few loaves...Why bother? Send them away!" But whether the scene is with one cup of cold water, or a widow's mite, or a new way of dealing with our enemies, or starting with just five loaves of bread, Jesus' answer again and again is simply, "Let's see."

In Matthew's account of this story, the disciples persist in the scarcity mindset by suggesting to Jesus that he send the crowd away into the villages to buy food for themselves as a way - in economic terms - of allocating scarcity, by having them compete for food in the economy of the villages whereby those who can afford it will get some food, and those who can't won't.<sup>iii</sup> This prescription by the disciples also assumed that Jesus should use his authority in such a way that made his power also a scarce commodity, to be held only by a few. Instead, Jesus guides them in a very different direction as he operates on a very different set of assumptions. He looked at the same situation that the disciples looked at, but where they saw not enough, he saw plenty: plenty of time, plenty of food and plenty of possibilities with the resources at hand. Not that Jesus knew just how it was all going to work out, exactly; but what he knew beyond a shadow of a doubt was that wherever there was plenty of God, there would be plenty of everything else. So, rather than ordering a way of allocating scarcity through a competitive process, Jesus opted for a way of sharing abundance through a more cooperative process. Rather than sending the crowd away to compete on their own with their different degrees of purchasing power as individuals or in family clans; instead, Jesus calls for a cooperative and generous spirit of a whole community, in order to generate abundance in the midst of seeming scarcity. Jesus tells his disciples, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat," thus urging his disciples to discover that community and abundance go hand in hand.

From this beginning, Jesus takes his disciples and the crowd through the illusion of scarcity into the reality of abundance. In the other gospels' versions of this story,<sup>iv</sup> Jesus then gathers the large faceless crowd into smaller more intimate groupings where everyday miracles have a chance of happening; where they can meet, interact – where abundance will replace scarcity; and lo and behold, a miracle starts to happen, the miracle that there never seems to be enough even for ourselves *until* we start sharing. As Jesus distributes the rather meager rations from the five loaves and two fish, probably some in the crowd might have laughed at least quietly, while others would have been mystified, while still others were embarrassed for Jesus, that he should have promised so much with so little to deliver. But seeing Jesus believe and then act on his assumptions of abundance, a number of the people themselves began to realize that they could share what they *really* had, so that the result was that everyone was satisfied. For what they really had in that crowd of 5,000 were a lot more than five loaves and two fish. And so, caught up in the contemplative moment they not only witness a miracle, but *participate* in it – not just by receiving the food but in *sharing the extra* food hidden in their pockets, thus discovering their own capacity for creating abundance – discovering that there never seems to be enough even for ourselves, *until* we start sharing.

Now, some of you might point out – and Barbara Brown Taylor does – that what I've just described is not a miracle:

“That is just human beings being generous, sharing what they have...even when it is not enough to go around. That is not a miracle! That is just a whole crowd of people moving from a sense of scarcity to a sense of plenty – overcoming their fear of going hungry, giving up their need to protect themselves...That is not a miracle! Or is it? The problem with miracles is that we tend to get mesmerized by them, focusing on God's responsibility and forgetting our own. Miracles let us off the hook. They appeal to the part of us that is all too happy to let God feed the crowd, save the world, [or stop the war,] do it all...after all what we have to offer is not enough to make any difference...so we hold back and wait for a miracle, looking after our own needs and looking for God to help those who cannot help themselves...‘They need not go away,’ Jesus says, ‘You give them something to eat.’ Not me but you; not my bread but yours; not sometime or somewhere else but right here and now. Stop looking for someone else to solve the problem and solve it yourselves. Stop waiting for food to fall from the sky, and share what you have. Stop waiting for a miracle and participate in one instead.”<sup>v</sup>

“Without God we cannot. Without us, God will not,” wrote St. Augustine some 1,600 years ago.<sup>vi</sup> We have God's abundance in us. That's the realization Jesus wanted his disciples and the rest of us to come to – whether in the midst of a large and hungry crowd, or anywhere else our journey with the living Christ takes us. So, however much or little we have, we are invited to bring it to God, and to share it with others, believing that it is enough to begin with, enough to start something, even a miracle.

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<sup>i</sup> Parker Palmer, *The Active Life* (HarperSanFrancisco, 1990), pp.121-138. See also Walter Brueggemann, in *The Other Side* (Nov./Dec. 2001)

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<sup>ii</sup> Independent Commission on International Development Issues, “North-South: A program for Survival” (1980); and James Quilligan, “The Brandt Equation: 21<sup>st</sup> Century Blueprint for the New Global Economy” (2001).

<sup>iii</sup> Matthew 14:15;cf. Mark 6:35-36; Luke 9:12

<sup>iv</sup> Mark 6:39; Luke 9:14-15; cf. John 6:10.

<sup>v</sup> Barbara Brown Taylor, The Seeds of Heaven (Cincinnati: Forward Movement Publications, 1990), pp. 30-32.

<sup>vi</sup> Quoted in Robert Edward Luccock, If God Be For Us: Sermons on the Gifts of the Gospel (New York: Harper, 1954). In Augustine’s actual writings, the quote that comes closest to this is, “He who created you without you will not justify you without you,” (in his 169<sup>th</sup> Sermon).