

“What Do you Have?”¹
John 6:1-14; Philippians 4:4-13
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Making Room for Generosity – Sermon 2
October 28, 2018

Faced with a crowd of 5,000 hungry people, Jesus asks, “Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?” The Gospel of John says this whole thing was a test to see what his disciples would do. Philip answers: “Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little.”

It is a practical answer. It’s the knee jerk answer I give all the time. “Let’s take a vacation.” There’s not enough money for that. “Let’s add an elevator to the fellowship hall.” Too expensive. And I know I’m not the only one giving that kind of an answer. “Let’s give our schools the money that the last bipartisan commission told them they need to educate children.” We don’t have money for that. “Let’s fix healthcare costs so middle income people can actually afford it.” We don’t have the money for that. Let’s invest in transit. Let’s reduce our carbon footprint. Let’s create safe places for recreation for all of our children. Not enough. Not enough. Not enough.

Of course, there’s usually some measure of truth in that answer which is what makes it so compelling. You can’t blame Philip for pointing out that truth. “Six months’ wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little,” he says which is absolutely correct. According to the Social Security Administration, the median wage of an American worker in 2017 was 31,561.² So six month’s wages would be \$15,784. Spread across 5,000 people, that would be \$3.16 per person. While that could certainly provide a basic meal, it’s not enough for the \$5 meal deal at KFC. And Galilean fishermen likely earned less than the median wage of their day. You can’t blame Philip for giving an answer that is correct based on the available data.

But it’s the wrong answer, at least if you are a follower of Jesus. It’s the wrong answer to start with when people are hungry, when basic needs are not being met. The right answer, according to John, comes from a boy with five loaves and two fish. I love it that the right answer comes from a child. Presumably a boy who hasn’t learned yet about supply and demand, invisible hands of markets, the need to save up for yourself before you share with others. A boy who hasn’t learned yet that the way you get ahead in the world is by managing and protecting what you have not by sharing it. A boy who hasn’t yet learned that lesson that comes so early to so many of us that we don’t even realize that someone had to teach it to us. That lesson that’s there’s not enough to around. A child who as far as we know offers the lunch he has or at least doesn’t hide it from the rest.

¹ I am grateful to the Rev. Dr. Joe Clifford, member of the Well preaching group, for the architecture and insights of this sermon series. Joe draws on *Enough: Discovering Joy Through Simplicity and Generosity* by Adam Hamilton.

² See: <https://www.ssa.gov/OACT/COLA/central.html>

What happens next is subject to interpretation. Maybe a supernatural miracle. The loaves and fish multiplied. Everyone had more than enough. Or maybe this one boy's generosity prompted everyone else to start sharing. A kind of "Stone Soup" story where one act of generosity soon prompts others to share in similar ways. But I'm not sure it matters all that much. Supernatural miracles, if they're even possible, must come from a place other than us. They're out of our control by definition. What is in our control is to look at what we have in the context of the immense need that surrounds us.

I've been thinking a lot lately about the difference between recognizing what you do have vs. focusing on what you don't. Recognizing how good most of us have it – food on the table, a safe, warm place to sleep. Opportunity. Hope. But even more than that, looking past the dominant culture's ideas what we lack to notice the gifts that we've been given.

The dominant culture's notions of scarcity clouds our ability to see other people for who they are. Scarcity takes migrants fleeing violence and hunger in their own country and turns them into "invaders," criminals, even rapists that are coming to take our jobs. Scarcity turns Democrats and Republicans from citizens holding different convictions of how to make our country better for everyone into enemies who can only win by tearing down their opposition and the whole country in the process. Scarcity always leads to violence since I have to protect what little I have from someone else taking it. Scarcity is what fueled the rise of slavery, feeds white supremacy, fattens anti-Semitism and the pockets of those who benefit from the arms race that floods guns on our streets.

When you can't see that what you already have within yourself and within your community is enough to live and love and share and give, then you miss the abundance that is already with you. And you miss the central Gospel truth that there is always more when we share. We need to recapture our vision to be able to see that what we have is enough to get our lives, our church, our city, our nation, our world on the right track. We need people with that kind of abundant vision.

People like the late Tony Deering, the focus of an article in yesterday's Sun who helped BUILD raise money for the total neighborhood transformation of the Oliver Community in West Baltimore. Tony, the former CEO of the Rouse corporation and a wealthy man, heard about 5 churches in east Baltimore that raised \$1.2 million in their offering plates because they were sick and tired of the narrative of scarcity about their own crumbling neighborhood. In the '90s no investor was looking at east Baltimore - "not enough resources there," the story went: not enough middle income people, not enough jobs, not enough stable housing, not enough people, not enough capital. Only the church saw promise there. "Look at *what we have*," those churches told their newly hired developer, "not just at *what we lack*." The developer did just that. "You're in the shadow of one of the greatest medical institutions in the history of humankind," he mirrored back to them, "an institution who is also the largest private employer in the state of Maryland." "You are just blocks from Penn Station, 3 hours from the banking capital of world, 1 hour from the political capital of the world. You have the makings of historic housing and the history of a thriving African-American community, generations of people who refuse to leave their block. This community has more

than enough to be successful. More than enough to remove the vacants.” Tony Deering caught the vision. He gave a million dollars and a rolodex of friends who could write those checks. The more they looked at what neighbors in east Baltimore knew what they had, the more the resources kept multiplying. The vacancy rate keeps falling from 37% in 2004 to below 17% today. We need people who know that what we have is usually more than enough.

Or people like Stacey Abrams, candidate for Governor of Georgia, who, if elected will be the first black woman elected governor in the history of the United States. Growing up the house didn’t always have electricity or water, but it had plenty of books. One of six children, I’m sure there was a lot she wanted but didn’t get, yet she had five brothers and sisters and two parents who loved her into her dreams and fought for those dreams, too. If she does get to move into the Governor’s mansion, it won’t be there first time she’s been there. In 1991, the year she graduated from high school she and her parents were on their way to the Governor’s annual reception for valedictorians when their car broke down. So they took the bus. A guard tried to keep them out, suspicious since they were the only ones arriving on foot. But Ms. Abram’s preacher parents were civil rights veterans. “After awhile,” she said, “[the guard] start[ed] to reconsider his decision-making skills.”³ Her family had more than enough for a life that is full and good and overflowing with more to give.

We need people with that abundant vision. People like that little boy who offers his barley loaves and fish because he realized in the face of enormous need that he had something to offer.

And what about you? What do you have? Many of us have a great deal. Many of us have more than enough. In a nation where the median wage is somewhere around \$31,000 a year; in a world where 1.2 billion people live on less than \$1.25 a day, that’s not true for many, but it is true for many of us. Considering what we have moves us from fear and want to thanksgiving and gratitude. In fact, when we respond to what we’ve been given by giving thanks to God, we model the way of Jesus, for that’s what he does with the five barely rolls and two fish given to him. He gives thanks: eucharizo in the Greek from which we get the word “Eucharist.”

Beginning with thanksgiving for all we have, we discover contentment in life. We realize we do not need more to be content. We discover that peace Paul describes in Philippians, a peace that guards our hearts and minds against that nagging fear that there is not enough, that we are somehow lacking what we need. This frees us to simplify our lives, to make space in our lives for what really matters, to make time for what really feeds our souls, for relationships, for loving God with all we are and loving our neighbors as we love ourselves. That love calls us to be generous, to share what’s been entrusted to us with others, to join God’s transforming work in the world.

³ “Stacey Abrams, a Daughter of the South, Asks Georgia to Change,” *The New York Times*, Sarah Lyall and Richard Faussett, October 26, 2018.

As I finalized these words last night I wondered if it would seem odd to be advocating generosity the day after the worst violent attack on synagogue in American history, in a week where a white man killed two African-Americans after a failed attempt to barge into a black church, in a week where mail bombs were sent by another man with a history of hate-filled messages online to people who have criticized the President. News articles have already turned to talk about security and armed guards and the need for protection. It doesn't seem the right time to be talking about generosity when we need to be talking about justice.

But a stinginess has come over our culture, feeding or perhaps fed by dangerous and ancient prejudices and hate. A fear that is familiar to us in Baltimore that has descended on the world. And it seems to me exactly the right time to recognize that there is enough for me and my neighbors. There are enough resources for Baltimore City children to get a good education and all other children, too. There are enough resources for those living here to have meaningful work and for those fleeing to this place to get support from their global neighbors either to live in safety at home or find shelter when they come here. There is enough love for Jews and Muslim and Christians and people of no faith to share the same land. There are enough resources for African-Americans, and Latinos, and European Americans and many others – when we tend to each other out of respect, and love and generosity. There is enough when we start with what we have and trust in the one who takes and breaks and gives and teaches us the abundance that comes when we share what we have. There is enough. A message that can start from anywhere, like a boy in a hungry crowd who, in one small, but critical act of faith, offers up what he has and witnesses the contagious joy the sweeps over a crowd that is satisfied.