

Now, There Is Enough

Matthew 14:13-21

And all ate and were filled; and they took up what was left over of the broken pieces, twelve baskets full."—Matthew 14:20

I read a story in Readers' Digest about a homeless beggar who walked up to a well-dressed woman shopping in Beverly Hills. The man moaned, "I haven't eaten anything in four days." The woman looked at him, sighed deeply, and said, "Gosh, I wish I had your willpower."

Like the Beverly Hills woman, many people are unable to see the needs that exist in their community, needs that could be addressed by sharing from their relative abundance. Sometimes such blindness is brought on by the demon of fear; perhaps a memory of a time when they had to do without something important, or a nightmare that they might end up poor as the homeless beggar. Such people rarely experience a feeling of personal abundance. Rather, they are driven to accumulate money and material things by a constant feeling of scarcity.

A feeling of scarcity is a very natural thing.

I saw a feeling of scarcity at work in our now deceased cat Katie, whose well-balanced diet is supplemented by special treats of one kind or another. Sometimes we'd cook a hot dog, dice it into little slices, and place it in her bowl. Katie would greedily gobble that hot dog in ten seconds or less.

William Willimon reminds us that dogs devour food so quickly because for their ancestors in the wild, food was rare. When a kill was made, all the dogs

gathered around the carcass and wolfed down the meat. It was important to eat fast in order to get your fair share.

Yes, a feeling of scarcity is a very natural thing.

In the fourteenth chapter of the Gospel of Matthew, Jesus' disciples exhibit a feeling of scarcity.

The scene opens in the countryside, where a great multitude of people has followed Jesus, five thousand men, not counting women and children. All day long the disciples have assisted Jesus in his ministry. When evening comes, the disciples recognize the precarious situation, thousands of people far from town with no plan for supper. They say to Jesus, "This is a deserted place, and the hour is now late; send the crowds away so that they may go into the villages and buy food for themselves."

Jesus replies, "They need not go away; you give them something to eat."

Barbara Brown Taylor writes that in contrast to the disciples, "What Jesus operated out of was a sense of plenty. He looked at the same things 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."

If we had been there, we probably would have been distressed by Jesus' response, "you give them something to eat."

If we are "thinking" types, it would have made no sense. If we are "feeling" types, we would have been hurt. "We have nothing here but five loaves and two fish" – in this situation, a feeling of scarcity is a very natural thing.

At that critical moment Jesus does something that is not natural, something that is, I believe, a very supernatural thing.

With the help of his disciples, Jesus orders the crowds to take a seat in the grass. Taking the five loaves and two fish, he looks up to heaven, blesses and breaks the loaves. Fish and bread are distributed, and suddenly there are more fillets and loaves than were there before.

The crowd numbers five thousand men, with women and children besides. Yet all eat and are filled. They collect what is left over, and there are twelve baskets full of broken pieces, far more than Jesus started with.

The movement from scarcity to surplus happens so unexpectedly that description trumps explanation. Perhaps it happens like a special effect in a Hollywood movie. Perhaps loaves and fish grow when you're not looking, or multiply as they are being transferred from one person to another.

Or, perhaps, as a loaf is passed through the crowd, a woman draws bread from a bundle, and passes it on to others. As a plate of fish is handed from person to person, a man pulls out four salted fillets wrapped in ferns, and adds three to the plate. Others contribute bits and pieces of food they have carried with them for a snack in this deserted place to which they had followed Jesus.

It's like the story about "Stone Soup." It is said that in France, long ago during some now forgotten war, soldiers were going hungry. Poor villagers told them that there was no food to be found.

One of the soldiers said, "We'll have to make some stone soup."

He brought in a huge pot. He filled it with water, put in a stone. He started a fire under the kettle, and raved about how good the soup would be when it was done. A little while later, a curious older woman approached, and admitted that she had a few carrots she could throw in. It wasn't long before a young boy donated a potato. More and more people approached the pot, and each one in turn offered something to enhance the stew. In time the pot was filled to the brim with small, seemingly insignificant donations from each villager. Soon the soldiers had enough soup to feed everyone, plus leftovers for the next day.

Perhaps stories of stone soup, or shared bread in the backcountry, don't impress you as having a miraculous quality. I beg to differ. A feeling of scarcity is a very natural thing. But a feeling of surplus? That is a supernatural thing, a gift born of God's grace.

It's not difficult to see what's wrong with the world. There is war and oppression, there is sickness and sorrow, and now CoVid . There is hunger.

It's easy to see what's wrong, but it seems hard to know what can be done about it. The disciples had no trouble diagnosing the troubling situation around them. A crowd had come to follow Jesus to find healing, but had collectively forgotten to pack a lunch. The disciples point this out to Jesus and his response speaks volumes: "You give them something to eat. But what

could they give? All they had was five loaves and two fish, a laughable amount for such a crowd. But through Jesus even what little they have becomes enough. The crowds are fed and sent away full, with leftovers for the fridge. With God's abundance comes a call: Don't just see the problem. Be the way God will solve it.

Lets us pray. Abundant God, there is so much trouble in the world. It can overwhelm us. Open our eyes to your plenteous goodness and inspire us to be means of grace in the world. Amen.