

Living Communion
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I've been going with Covenant to serve at the NorthSide Food Pantry for a couple of years now. My job is to sit at the computer and check people in. That means I get to observe the guests—some rushing to grab items and some giving back what they know they won't use. What's clear is this: most people feel there isn't enough to go around. And often, they're right. Or at least not enough of the things that people really need. Which is why one of the things I always notice is when someone seems something and picks it up to give to someone else. I have often seen people who know each other a bit or who have observed a mom with kids or a person dealing with a disability take the time to point out something they think someone else could use. It's a reminder to me of how people want to find ways to be generous, even when there doesn't seem like there is enough.

Pastor Sarah preached last week about how our faith invites us to see the world as a place of abundance and to shun the narrative of scarcity. But I think we can agree that that can be extremely difficult. People have always struggled with the fear that there isn't enough to go around, but today we're bombarded with messages which insist there isn't. One estimate I read said we see over 5000 messages competing for our attention every day. Our retail and consumer culture spends billions of dollars to convince us at every opportunity that there isn't enough to go around **and** that even if we have enough, we should always be accumulating more, wanting more, doing whatever we can, to get more.

The power of this narrative of scarcity is that it actually creates scarcity. The more we believe there isn't enough, the more those of us with resources accumulate, and the more we create actual scarcity for those who have few resources. The more we believe in the narrative of scarcity, the more scarcity we create.

Great theologian Walter Bruggemann's article from 1999 called the Liturgy of Abundance and the Myth of Scarcity, says: "According to (marketers), whoever has the most (stuff) when he dies wins. We end up only with whatever we manage to get for ourselves. This story ends in despair. It gives us a present tense of anxiety, fear, greed and brutality. It produces ...indifference to the poor, the buildup of armaments, divisions between people, and environmental racism. It tells us not to care about anyone but ourselves-and it is the prevailing creed of American society."

But as people of faith, we have another narrative to believe – a better choice - a greater truth to share with the world. This narrative is found all throughout

scripture from the creation story through the story of Jesus' life, death and resurrection and it is a countercultural story of God's provision and abundance.

One of the best illustrations of God's abundance is in the familiar story we read this morning. In fact, this is the story the early church would read when they gathered for communion. Often in secret places, under cover of darkness, they would tell the story of Jesus' feeding the 5000 - this simple story of Jesus telling the disciples to feed people. Why this story? Because this story was central to who they understood Jesus to be.

There are lots of theories about what happened next to that lake. Was it a miracle? Lots of people sharing the little they had to create enough? An exaggeration? Not really 5000 people? But, it doesn't really matter what we think really happened that day. The message of this story is that whoever was there that day was absolutely sure there wasn't enough food. So sure they would have staked their lives on it. And yet, all the people were fed with leftovers to spare.

This story is who Jesus was. Jesus was someone who believed there wasn't just enough for everyone, but more than enough, and sure enough, wherever he went, there was. He believed there was an abundance; he lived as though there was an abundance; he spoke as though there was an abundance, and there was an abundance.

Theologian Walter Bruggemann continues:

"Jesus presents an entirely different kind of economy, one infused with the mystery of abundance and a cruciform kind of generosity. Five thousand are fed and 12 baskets of food are left over... Jesus transforms the economy by blessing it and breaking it beyond self-interest... In this ... miraculous feeding, people do not grasp, hoard, resent, or act selfishly; they watch as the juices of heaven multiply the bread of earth. The world is filled with abundance and freighted with generosity."

That is one of the great joys and truths of Christian life. It is one of the gifts we can offer the world: the belief that the world is filled with abundance and freighted with generosity. We are called to be the people who believe, speak and live with that as our narrative, our reality. And it is a gift because it can help us break free of the chains of the narrative myth of scarcity and to experience the drastic contrast of a life lived in the reality of abundance. In that reality we find that God's generosity offers a bigger vision. God's abundance doesn't set aside a small portion from which to give or hoard resources or live in fear or cause the grasping greed we see so much of. If we choose God's generosity it will invite us to be counter-cultural and even risk-taking with who we give to and how much we give, but when we choose it, some of the most amazing and powerful things can happen.

Preacher John Buchanan told one such powerful story in a sermon I heard him preach once. He told of how when he was briefly ministering in a small parish in Scotland, a neighboring pastor, Johnny Dunlop, reached out to him and over time, they shared their stories. Johnny had been in the infantry in the British Army in World War II and had been captured and taken to a prisoner of war camp in Poland. It was dreadful: cold, wet, filthy, and worst of all, there was almost no food, just a bowl of thin soup and a scrap of bread once a day. Prisoners lost weight, until they were skin and bones.. The war was not going very well for the Allies, and there didn't seem to be any reason for hope. As the tide began to turn and Germany's fortunes diminished, the conditions in the prisoner of war camp became worse, until some prisoners didn't want to go on. Johnny said that one night, deeply discouraged, depressed, and sick with despair and hunger, he slipped out of the barracks and walked toward the fence, wondering if he should give up. He sat down on the bare ground thinking. He sensed movement in the dark on the other side of the barbed wire. It was a Polish farmer. He had half a potato in his hand. He thrust the potato through the barbed wire. As Johnny Dunlop took it, the man said, in heavily accented English, "The Body of Christ." That is the abundance of God. The kind of abundance where half a potato becomes communion; where half a potato can suddenly become something more than food; where half a potato is hope, grace and the chance to meet Christ face to face..

Few of us have ever experienced the kind of true scarcity of that story. Most of us have enough, and more than enough, food, clothing, roofs over our heads and more stuff than we'd ever really need. And yet, so often, our generosity is so carefully controlled and measured that it could hardly be called abundant. And it's certainly safer, or at least easier, to be practical and careful and choose our moments of generosity. But if we never step out in faith of God's abundance, we will miss opportunities to witness God in the kind of communion that is life-changing, heart-widening, soul-transforming. We will miss the opportunity to see with our own eyes the proof that the narrative of scarcity is a myth and to get a glimpse of what God's abundance really looks like.

I would never discount the powerful experiences of God's abundance here in our sanctuary when we break bread and share the cup, but this is never meant to be the only place we experience communion. We take communion here so we'll have practice at looking into the eyes of others and seeing the body and blood of Christ was given for them too. We take communion here, so in our day-to-day lives we would remember being fed abundantly at God's table and want to make sure everyone was fed and had enough. We take communion here, so we can learn to trust in God's provision and finally be released from that never-ending race to hoard more and more for ourselves. We take communion here so we would live knowing there is enough and we are enough.

We practice communion together so we would hear the message over and over again – the message from God that there is enough to go around, in fact there is more than enough, and that each and every one of us is enough in God’s eyes – just as we are – you are enough, you are beloved, you are perfectly and wonderfully made – and so is the person sitting next to you and across the aisle and the one sitting on the corner begging and the one locked inside a prison cell and the one dying and the one struggling with addiction and the one in the refugee camp and the one who is lost or alone or has been made to feel less than. We are enough. There is enough. In the body and blood of Christ, we are freed to be generous beyond our wildest imaginations and called to step courageously into God’s abundance.

So, as you practice communion today with people here in this sanctuary and all over the world, may you feel your courage shored up so you can choose abundance whenever the fear of scarcity rears up in your mind. As you come forward and receive this bread and this cup, know that you are practicing for the life God calls you to live. And when you leave this table, remember: *we practice communion here so we can live communion everywhere. Amen.*