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John 6:1-15

An Abundance Mentality

You may know from your Bible study or from your time in Sunday school that today's story "The Feeding of the 5000" is the only miracle of Jesus found in all four gospels. It's one of the most well-known and most often cited stories in the New Testament. I was at a birthday party just two nights ago and there was a surprising amount of food leftover. Sure enough, someone said it: "It's the loaves and fishes."

In John's gospel, Jesus and his disciples traveled the Galilean countryside healing people of illness and disease. Afterwards, we're told they went to the other side of the Sea of Galilee. A large crowd kept following them, because they saw the way Jesus healed the sick. Jesus went up a mountain with the disciples and sat down for a time.

Eventually, Jesus looked up and saw a large crowd coming. That's when he asked Philip a trick question. He asked Philip a question to test how much he understood about Jesus and about the kingdom of heaven. The question was "Where are we to buy bread for these people to eat?"

I think there's something important behind this question. The question Jesus was really asking is do you have a scarcity mentality or an abundance mentality? Remember, they were on a mountaintop in the middle of nowhere. It was a crowd of 5000 people. There was no Cumberland Farms open until midnight. There was no Lobsters Off the Boat or Anthony's Food Shop around the corner.

Philip answered from a scarcity mentality. He said, "Six months wages wouldn't even buy enough bread for each person to have a little." Did you hear it? Philip focused on their lack of money. The scarcity mentality looks at the situation and determines there's a shortage of resources.

The scarcity mentality prevents us from being generous and giving, because we fear we won't have enough. The scarcity mentality prevents people from fulfilling their dreams, because they think they lack the intelligence or the talent or the capability. The scarcity mentality prevents churches from doing powerful things in the community, because there aren't as many church members or financial contributions as there once was.

Maybe the most tragic thing about the scarcity mentality is what it says about our relationship with God. If we go through life seeing scarcity everywhere, it follows that maybe God isn't such a great provider. Maybe God isn't all that powerful. Maybe God doesn't care all that much about us and our needs.

After Philip answered Jesus, Andrew spoke up. He said, "There's a boy here who has five barley loaves and two fish. But what are they among so many people?" There's the

scarcity mentality again. The need seems too great. We can't feed everybody. There isn't enough.

The disciples aren't the heroes of this story. It was the boy. Faced with the task of feeding a large crowd, Jesus turned to his inner circle. They didn't know what to do. Meanwhile, this anonymous young boy came prepared. He anticipated the need. He thought, "This huge crowd is going to get hungry. There won't be anywhere to buy food out in the wilderness. I better grab as many loaves and fishes as I can carry."

I think the boy represents the abundance mentality. He didn't know how everyone would get fed. He probably realized his contribution alone wasn't going to get it done. He might have thought, "I've got something to contribute. If Jesus can heal the sick, maybe he can take my small offering and do something miraculous with it."

That's an abundance mentality. It's believing there is a way even when a way isn't visible. Why? Because we worship a God, not of scarcity, but of abundance. It's believing God cares about all God's creatures. It's believing God is an awesome provider. The abundance mentality leads to choosing generosity over stinginess, faith over disbelief, sharing over hoarding, compassion over hard-heartedness, trust over fear.

And we know the outcome of this story. Five loaves of bread and two fish was enough to feed 5000 people. God was able to make that happen, showing that our God is a God of abundance. And there's an interesting link between this God of abundance and Jesus in this story.

After learning about the boy, Jesus said, "Make the people sit down." John highlights the fact that there was a great deal of grass in that place. In Mark's version of the story, Mark adds a detail. In Mark's gospel, Jesus orders the disciples to make the crowd sit down on the *green* grass.

Can you think of an Old Testament image relating to green grass? It's Psalm 23 – "The Lord is my shepherd; I shall not want. He maketh me to lie down in green pastures: he leadeth me beside the still waters." It might be that, in this story, Jesus is portrayed as the shepherd of Psalm 23, the shepherd that provides in abundance. The psalm goes on to say, "Thou preparest a table before me in the presence of my enemies: thou anointest my head with oil; my cup runneth over."

A scarcity mentality limits what we can accomplish. An abundance mentality leads to remarkable ministry. A scarcity mentality inhibits faith. An abundance mentality strengthens faith. A scarcity mentality limits what God can do through us. An abundance mentality invites God into our situation.

I think this story indicates a couple things to do if we want to have an abundance mentality. First, take an inventory. When the question arose about feeding the crowd, it didn't look promising, but the disciples finally looked around to see what resources were available. Sometimes we have more at our disposal than we realize.

Years ago, I saw some television talk show. There was a professional organizer on the program. She made the claim that if you just clean and organize your house, you will find money you didn't know you had, probably hundreds of dollars.

I'm not claiming that this will be true for you, but I tried it and it worked. When I really look, I find things I didn't know I had. I might find a check sitting in a pile of papers that I never deposited. I have a junk drawer in the kitchen. I organized it once and found about \$150 in gift certificates and gift cards that I forgot I had.

The boy in the story was not one of the disciples. Sometimes I think churches miss opportunities, because we don't take an inventory of the resources out in the community. There may be people and organizations with expertise and knowhow that we don't have, with whom we can partner to do important things.

As terrible as the pandemic has been, some good things developed. More food pantries emerged. School systems seemed to become a little more aware of mental illness in their children. Businesses and churches made important adaptations.

After taking an inventory of what they had, Jesus took the loaves and the fish and gave thanks to God. Even in circumstances where we don't have much, the second thing we can do to have an abundance mentality is to give thanks for what we do have. There's something about just expressing gratitude that fosters an abundance mentality.

I went to visit some friends out west on my vacation. They have two kids aged 4 and 7. They're not church going people, but every time we sat down together for dinner, we went around the table and named something from the day for which we were grateful. I realized that, in hearing others share, I became more aware of God's goodness.

In her book Grateful: The Transformative Power of Giving Thanks, Diana Butler Bass recounts an interview Oprah Winfrey did with holocaust survivor Elie Wiesel. Oprah asked, "Despite all the tragedy you've witnessed, do you still have a place inside you for gratefulness? Wiesel responded, "Absolutely...when a person doesn't have gratitude, something is missing in his or her humanity. A person can almost be defined by his or her attitude toward gratitude."

After giving thanks to God, Jesus distributed the bread and the fish to those who were seated and all were satisfied. And in case anyone wasn't amazed that 5000 people were fed with five loaves of bread and two fish, they gathered up twelve baskets of leftovers.

Our God is an awesome God, a God that loves boundlessly, forgives limitlessly, and provides abundantly. Therefore, when you feel overwhelmed, when the need is great and you're on your last nerve, when your to-do list looks like 5000 hungry people, take an inventory. Give God thanks for what you have.

And know that it's not about how much you have to give. It's about how much God can give with what you have to offer.

