

## A Theology of Abundance

John 6:1-21

Richard C. Allen

July 26, 2009

South Glastonbury

Connecticut

Among the four Gospel writers, John is the one known for theology. He is the one who thinks of the Jesus stories as revealing the mind of God. The stories John includes are great stories in their own right, but they point to a meaning beyond themselves; they make known to us the very nature of God. And that really matters to us because we are all made in the image of God. So, one way to understand ourselves is by coming to understand something of our Maker. By telling the story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand the way he does, John would have us all know that we are not formed out of the clay of scarcity; that we are formed, instead, from the clay of abundance.

In John's telling of this story, the disciples are used as a contrast to the mind of God. The disciples operate out of a theology of scarcity. That is, they see the size of the crowd; they count the number of loaves and fish; they believe, tragically, there won't be enough to go around.

Both the ancient and the modern reader are somewhat sympathetic with the disciples' dilemma. Like them, many of us were shaped by a theology of scarcity, a belief there may not be enough. In a theology of scarcity, one must not be too generous lest there end up a short fall.

What Jesus sees is that this theology of scarcity is a crippling theology, a theology that is born of fear, not of God; a theology that reflects not the mind of God, but the mind of one who has yet to imagine living by faith.

The Feeding of the Five Thousand is an invitation to live by faith; to trust a theology of abundance, to know that Jesus Christ came into the world that we all might have life and have it with abundance.

What I have seen in my 62 years is that most of us struggle constantly with these dueling theologies. It's not as simple as having one or the other, scarcity or abundance. My Grandfather Allen is a good example of the struggle. He and Nana Allen were regular guests at our Sunday dinner table in the 1950's. The two of them plus our eight made quite a crowd at the table. Midway through the meal, he would pick up the bread basket, whip it around the table too fast for anyone to grab an extra roll, and say, "Anybody want a second roll?" Though the smile on his face assured us he was just joking, the intensity of his drama with the bread basket revealed that he had lived through the Great Depression when seconds on rolls couldn't be taken for granted. He had been shaped, in part, by a theology of scarcity.

On other days, the Grandparents would show up with a big brown bag of raised doughnuts, doughnuts the size of softballs, and plenty of them. They'd pour a generous amount of sugar into the bag and then they'd let us take turns shaking the bag until each doughnut was covered with a sweet layer of granulated sugar. Such abundance was rare in our home in those days. Rare! When we'd see their car, an old Hudson, drive up our driveway, we'd press our faces to the window to see if they were bringing the telltale brown bag. Because, on those occasions, it was clear they had been shaped by a theology of abundance.

I'd like to think my own identity as a disciple of Jesus Christ was formed more by the raised doughnuts than by the bread basket whisked past our faces.

When John tells the story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand, he ends it with an exclamation point! When everyone had eaten freely of the bread and the fish, Jesus sent the disciples out to gather up the leftovers. And they gathered up TWELVE baskets of leftovers! Imagine that! Twelve!

The twelve baskets of leftovers are the exclamation point. They stand as a total contrast to the disciples' initial fear of not having enough to go around.

Whether or not the Feeding of the Five Thousand was a miracle misses the point. The truth revealed here is that God is the very essence of abundance, and that we are called to reflect that same image of abundance in our discipleship.

When neighboring churches appear to be struggling to keep their doors open, I invite them to read this story from John about the Feeding of the Five Thousand, and to see where they find themselves in the story. The churches that are dying are the ones who see themselves as the early disciples did; paralyzed by the size of the crowd. They see the hunger of the world for justice; they calculate their limited resources, and they wilt. The churches who are thriving are the ones who see the crowd, who sense the hunger for justice, who count up the few loaves and fish, and who then say, 'come, let us ask God's blessing on the little we have and serve as many as are hungry; surely there will be enough.'

This spring, when we were interviewing candidates for the position of Minister of Discipleship Education, we asked one woman why she was applying for this particular position. We couldn't quite see the connection between her background and our job description. She told us she wanted to work at a church that operates out of a theology of abundance. She had heard that we are such a community of faith.

Is that true? Do we operate out of a theology of abundance? What's the evidence? The evidence is this: two high school students felt called to go on a mission trip to the Dominican Republic with our partner in ministry, Arm2Arm, but in order to go they had to be accompanied by two adults, two adults willing to sacrifice a week so that the youth could be in mission. Bob and Jackie Parente said, "Here we are; send us." That is the evidence of abundance!

In the year 2000, I celebrated my 25<sup>th</sup> year of ordination. South Church helped me celebrate by orchestrating a marvelous service here in the Meeting House and also with a supper at the Irish American Club where chicken was not the only thing "roasted." But beyond the church service and the supper, this congregation created a special fund for mission in my name so that members of the church could go forth and participate in extraordinary mission endeavors. You passed a hat around and \$30,000 landed in it! Monies from that fund helped send three of you to Malawi where you brought joy to orphaned children. Monies from that fund helped send four of you to the Cheyenne River Reservation last summer with Hawk Wing to repair damaged homes. Monies from that fund sent 30 of you to Biloxi, Mississippi to repair homes demolished in the Katrina hurricane. That is the evidence of abundance. And by the way, there's still twelve baskets full of money leftover! Anybody want to go to Mexico with Minh Han?

Abundance, of course, is not measured just in time and money. Over the last few weeks, many of you who are in Ladies Aid drove or rode down to Middlesex Hospital to sit for awhile with Alice Bisi as she was dying from cancer. She had good days and bad days. What I witnessed was an abundant flow of love. This love I witnessed was not the superficial kind that is here today and gone tomorrow; it was the agape love, the love between sisters that grows deeper through years of sharing life's joys and trials.

In all my ministry, I don't recall when I have been privy to such an abundance of TLC, tender, loving care.

I am sure there have been times when our church has acted out of a theology of scarcity, but what I see is that the balance most often tips in favor of abundance. It's as if John's story of the Feeding of the Five Thousand is well known here; has taken root here; has colored our understanding of what it means to be a disciple of Jesus Christ. And for that, I am deeply grateful, and it's what allows me, week in and week out, to remain in the greatest of hope. Amen.