

## *Scarcity or Abundance*

Time after Pentecost – Lectionary 17  
The Reverend Nancy R. Easton

Sunday, July 26, 2009  
Trinity Evangelical Lutheran Church

2 Kings 4:42-44; Psalm 145:10-18;  
Ephesians 3:14-21; John 6:1-21

Grace and peace to you from God our Father and our Lord Jesus Christ. Amen.

None of the state workers in my family are impacted by the budget impasse. Their salaries come from federal funds, not the state's general fund, so I am not speaking here with a personal axe to grind. However, I do speak out of compassion for those state employees who receive little or no pay while the budget negotiations drone on. I think it is morally wrong to withhold their pay simply because the money hasn't been "appropriated" yet. Wrong to use state workers as pawns in the political process. Simply because it isn't listed on reams of paper that the money is available and designated for such a purpose doesn't mean the money isn't available. We know the money is there, whether or not a budget is passed.

The continuing budget drama in Pennsylvania only confirms what our lessons describe this morning—that we human beings often have rather skewed and inaccurate views of what we lack and what we possess. We insist on acting in ways that speak of scarcity, of limitations, of impossibilities. We fail to see the abundance of our resources, the fullness of life around us, and all the possibilities for God's goodness to push through the impasses we insist on creating.

How telling is our first lesson from 2 Kings. It's a brief lesson, but sets the tone for us right off the bat. A man comes to offer the first fruits of his harvest to the Lord God by giving it to God's prophet Elisha. What a generous gift! What a glimpse of abundance in this man's own life! And what a wonderful hospitality in his sharing of that abundance! (You can bet his perspective is that he believes he has more than enough, and in gratitude for that abundance, gives it back to God.) He brings 20 loaves of barley, and a sack of fresh ears of grain to Elisha, for use in feeding Elisha's band of prophets. It is a time of famine in the land, and at first glance this looks like a feast. Except that Elisha's servant, having been commanded by Elisha to give it to Elisha's company of prophets, looks at it from his skewed perspective: "How can I set this before a hundred people?" Suddenly, what at first looked substantial appears miniscule to the servant's eyes. The servant isn't even willing to consider handing out the loaves and grain, because he is already certain it won't be enough. Elisha has to say to his servant two times these words: "Give it to the people and let them eat..." He has to provide to his servant an entirely new perspective on the food offering—God's perspective: "...for thus says the Lord, 'They shall eat and have some left.'"

It is only with that perspective—one that sees abundance, one that knows it will be enough to satisfy—can the food be given to Elisha's band of prophets and do exactly as Elisha prophesied it would.

What is it that makes us believe we never have enough? That perspective of scarcity, of lack, is pervasive in our society. It gnaws at us. It keeps us awake at night, worrying about our future, and regretting our past. It reduces us to comparing ourselves with our neighbors. It prevents us from generously sharing ourselves. It stops the Church dead in its tracks. For there are never enough hours in the day, there is never enough money in our checking account, never enough energy or resources or volunteers or time or any of the “stuff” necessary to accomplish anything when we have already deemed it out of the realm of possibility and beyond our limits. From our perspective, we may as well not even attempt. We may as well just forget the creative ideas God’s Holy Spirit is busy generating for us. Like Elisha’s servant we insist on saying, “How can I possibly do this?” And so we won’t.

Of course, the Church falls prey to this scarcity-skewed perspective all the time. We fret over lack of volunteerism, lack of space, lack of money, lack of leadership, lack of time. We dream dreams of wonderful ministries, then allow them to die on the vine because we fail to give them the energy and commitment needed for them to grow. We are miserly with our self-giving, so servant ideas and missional thinking move to the back burner—sometimes left on warm, but more often, the flame of impetus turned off entirely. We read of other congregations—and they are not necessarily larger or wealthier—and they do some incredible things in the name of Jesus Christ. We think, gee, that would be great if we could do that here. And then somewhere along the way someone says it can’t be done, and so we don’t do it.

Writer Sara Miles, in her book *Take This Bread*, tells the story of not only her own growth in faith, but also the growth of a substantial food pantry that she spearheaded in her congregation. That growth was never a smooth line forward into the future. It had rocky bumps after a difficult start, and there were many times when it seemed as if continuing the food pantry would be impossible. Not enough money. Not enough volunteers. Too many headaches. Miles writes how she herself and her congregation, St. Gregory’s, constantly raised up “what ifs” as impasse: *What if we became a magnet for hundreds of poor... street people? How were we going to decide whom to serve...? What if thieves started coming back after the pantry to steal from us? ...how would I possibly raise enough money to pay for feeding all comers? How would our nice neighbors react to crowds of hungry strangers from the projects on St. Gregory’s steps? What would happen if I couldn’t recruit enough volunteers? How were we going to deal with the mess, and damage to the sanctuary floor, and security, and garbage, and the risk of damaging our beautiful icons and art and the new altar?* (Pgs. 114-115)

It’s clear that unless someone as persuasive as the prophet Elisha convinces us to use what we’ve been given from God, we’ll insist on saying it won’t be enough. Unless someone provides us with a new perspective and we then believe that we have abundance to the hilt—only when that happens, will our lives be directed into giving and sharing and doing the work of God’s kingdom.

John’s Gospel today is key to this new perspective. For the next 5 weeks you and I will hear from John his account of Jesus’ feeding the 5,000 who came to see him and listen to him. We’ll hear not just the story of this miracle, but also the perspectives of those who experienced it or witnessed it or questioned it. And we’ll hear, through John, Jesus’ perspective. Which is the

very perspective needed in our lives today in order to be his disciples and live faithfully in his new life offered to us.

Some people say that this wasn't so much a miracle as it was a sharing of everyone's little bit of food so that all had more than enough. That the boy's initial offering of 5 loaves and 2 fish simply prompted everyone else to be less stingy with whatever provisions they brought, and all was shared with all. Like the familiar story of Stone Soup—that's how some people interpret John's account.

Frankly, I think that is the easy way out, and may I suggest actually a cop-out from seeing Jesus Christ and his role in this event.

What we learn about Jesus Christ is that he is the one who makes abundance for us. When that servant of Elisha asks, "How can I set this before a hundred people?" that's exactly the point. He can't. By myself, I can do nothing, or certainly very little. Our God is the only one who can set his gifts before people and they will be satisfied. And in fact, God has chosen to set his gift of his Son before his people—and it will be in Jesus that they will be satisfied. That's what John's account is about. Matthew, Mark and Luke record their own versions of Jesus feeding the crowds, but they pointedly write about how Jesus gave the food to the disciples to distribute. John here says Jesus himself handed out the food. I'm not asking us to figure out how he managed to distribute food to 5,000 by himself. I'm asking us to see what John is saying about Jesus. Only the Holy One, only God, can reach out to the masses and satisfy the hunger and heal the hurts of each and every individual. That's what Jesus' words and actions are all about. Who he is is indicated by what he does. What a sign of hope and real life is made present to the crowds that day! What generosity does God show in the person of Jesus! What a new perspective Jesus Christ gives to those who come out to hear him! They are given opportunity to see Jesus with new eyes; and to look upon life as marked with possibility and joy-filled and overflowing with God's promises.

Of course, in the weeks to come, and even in this lesson, we see that some folks view him, again, from their skewed perspective. Some of the crowd wish to force him to be king, to satisfy them in their own personal and political desires. Others will consider his words blasphemy—that he could not possibly call himself or actually BE the bread of life for the world, yet that is precisely what he will call himself next week. As we can see, even when offered a new perspective, when offered the chance to see Jesus for who he really is for the sake of the world, people may only see what they want to see for themselves.

But there are also those moments when the truth of Jesus as the Lord of Life come among us is revealed once more. Sara Miles, as she observed the folks coming to her congregation's food pantry, saw the wonder and mystery of her gracious God constantly revealed. In one chapter of her book, she tells of an elderly woman, Miss Lewis, who was a regular at the weekly food distribution at St. Gregory's. Sara had discovered that Miss Lewis would take her groceries back to her room at her boarding house, cook those groceries up on her small hot plate, then "put the meals in rinsed-out plastic containers, and take them down to feed the beggars who lived on her street." There was no scarcity in Miss Lewis' life. From her perspective, it was all abundance from God! Then came the day when another elderly regular complained of having been sick

with the flu the previous week, and Miss Lewis said to her, “You need to drink plenty of liquids,” then fished out of her bag of groceries a plastic container of cranberry-grape juice and a Dixie cup, and gave it to the woman. Sara likened it to Miss Lewis giving the very life-giving sacrament of communion. The blood of Christ, shed for you.

This evening marks yet another Summer Sundaes concert for us. Perhaps it would be easy to come up with reasons not to put on such an event. Is there money appropriated for this event? What if we don’t get donations to cover the cost? What if the band doesn’t have time for a really good rehearsal? What if the weather doesn’t cooperate? What if volunteers don’t step up to dish out the dessert? Those “what-ifs” are enough to persuade us we don’t have enough.

Yet at 6:30 our FaithX musicians will sing and play, and offer an abundance of music—with hope, outside in our parking lot! But even inside, there are no tickets required to attend this concert. It is an offering out of our abundance of musical gifts. Ice cream will be served up, and no one will have to purchase it in order to eat it and enjoy it, or even have to scoop it themselves. It is an offering out of our abundance of resources and time and volunteers and energy.

More to the point, it will be Jesus Christ offering himself through us. That is the perspective with which we ought to view this evening’s concert. That is the way we ought to see Jesus Christ our Lord at work in this place. That would be our Gospelwriter John’s take on the event. Almost like a sacrament, like the body of Christ, given for you. **AMEN.**