

SCARCITY AND ABUNDANCE

Sermon for Pentecost 20, Proper 24B: Job 38:1-7, Ps. 104, Mk 10:35-45

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My father's mother had a tough time during the Depression. She had five sons, and her husband was disabled with polio. They basically had no money. Probably because of the privations of that period, for the rest of my grandmother's life she was unable to throw out aluminum foil. When the time came for her to go into a nursing home, we found little pieces of aluminum foil in every drawer of her house, carefully cleaned and folded and put away for another use.

This hoarding behavior, psychologists say, is a form of Post Traumatic Stress Disorder. People who have been through periods of severe privation tend to hoard things even when the need to do so no longer exists.

My grandmother suffered privation during the Depression. What's our excuse?

What I mean is, people tend to hoard and defend their things without the need to do so. People are competitive and defensive, looking around to see if anyone else is getting the better of them. People are not, generally, generous with people outside their own families. These attitudes bespeak an underlying sense of privation and scarcity.

Certainly great evil has been perpetrated because people carry around a sense of scarcity, that there's never enough to go around. "There's not enough room for the both of us," is an example of this. From sibling rivalry, where brothers and sisters seem to think there's not enough of their parents' love to go around, to great wars that are waged because there's not enough land, or enough resources, this sense of scarcity gets people into trouble.

In today's reading from Mark, James and John seem to doubt that there's enough of Jesus' grace and favor to go around. They ask Jesus if the two of them may sit to Jesus' right and left when Jesus' reign is consummated and he comes into the power and glory that is rightfully his as the Son of God.

Jesus knows that the power he inherits will come at a very great price. Not only that, he knows that true power is not power as James and John conceive it. True power, Jesus knows, is not power over others. True power lies in the sacrificial love that unites people in relationship. Jesus will exemplify this love in giving his own life to unite his followers in a step toward redeeming all of creation.

Jesus asks James and John if they are ready for this kind of sacrifice and they glibly they say they are, though they clearly have no idea what Jesus is talking about. The other disciples get wind of the conversation and are upset with James and John and their presumption. They too seem to be afraid that there's not enough of Jesus' grace to go around.

At this Jesus delivers a little sermon. He draws a distinction between the “world,” where the strong exploit the weak, and the life he asks of his own followers. Jesus says, “Whoever wishes to become great among you must be your servant, and whoever wishes to be first among you must be slave of all.”

Followers of Jesus are not to follow “the ways of the world,” assuming that there is not enough to go around and always putting themselves forward to be sure not to miss out on the scarcity of resources.

That’s because there *is* enough of Jesus’ love, and grace, and forgiveness to go around. We don’t have to jostle each other around to get it. We don’t have to always be looking over our shoulder to see if someone else might get ahead of us in line and receive our share of the grace.

There is no such thing as scarcity when it comes to the love of God. Of this at least there is an abundance. Psalm 104 sings to the overflowing, abundant provision of God as represented by the magnificence of creation: “O Lord my God, how excellent is your greatness”

What is needed to avoid the fallacy of scarcity is that we “right-size.” We must right-size our self-concept and our God concept.

We need to right-size our self concept by remembering that we are not God. In today’s excerpt from Job, God responds, in an almost amusing way, to Job’s telling God what God should do: “Where were you when I laid the foundations of the earth?” God says to Job.

We need to remember that God is God, and we’re not. To come before God requires an appropriate humility. We can’t think too much of ourselves before the creator of the universe.

On the other hand, to come before God also requires a realization that God, incredibly, regards us as privileged children. We do not require mediators, or special permits, to come before God. We can’t think too little of ourselves when the eye of the creator takes us into its loving purview. And there is more than enough of God’s love to go around.

I ask you, which sounds more attractive, to come from an expectation of abundance, where one responds to the ready availability of grace with gratitude and generosity, or to come from an expectation of scarcity, where one is always putting oneself forward, hoarding one’s goods and looking around to see if anyone will get to heaven ahead of us? In which way lies the greater peace?

It’s clear which way God would have us go.