

The God of abundance

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There are times in my life when I feel like I've got nothing to give. There is no gas in my tank. No food in my fridge. I've got nothing left to say.

When I feel this way, however, my life doesn't stop. The trickle of e-mails keeps dripping into my inbox. The phone keeps whining for attention. The next sermon is in ten minutes. My to-do list looks like 5,000 hungry people.

At such moments of emotional scarcity, I like remembering this story of Jesus feeding 5,000. It reminds me of a fundamental truth—that the ministry I serve in Christ pivots not on how much I have or what I can give, but rather on how much God gives by multiplying what I have.

You know this story. After the news of the murder of his friend John, Jesus retreats to a lonely place. I imagine to mourn. The locals get wind that Jesus has come. The crowd is overwhelming and needy. Jesus heals with compassion. The crowd stays late, and the disciples want to send the people away so they can get something to eat.

But Jesus has another idea—what we call in the business “a teachable moment.” Jesus wants to teach his disciples something fundamental about the nature of God. It is a lesson, if we take it seriously, that frees us to re-imagine the world.

Jesus says, “You feed them.” The disciples look puzzled. They have nothing. No food. No reserves. They stare out at a hungry mass of people that looks more and more like a hungry mob.

The disciples respond, “We have nothing—only five loaves and two fish.”

Jesus says, “Bring your nothing to me.” He blesses the fish and bread and proceeds to distribute food to the masses. As Matthew tells the story, “All were filled.”

This story reminds me that sometimes Jesus is asking me to simply give my nothing—my little loaves and fishes—and then to stand back and watch Jesus teach a different kind of economy, an economy grown by God’s abundance.

This is a challenging thought. The God of Jesus knows no limitation. Out of nothing, God creates bara—something. The economy of the kingdom of God is abundant and knows no scarcity. My fridge doesn’t always have to be full for Jesus to take what I have and feed others.

This isn’t an invitation to be frivolous or live beyond our limits. Even after an experience of abundance the disciples still gather up and conserve wisely the leftovers.

A question to explore in a sermon is why we buy into the myth that there is not enough to go around. The world operates with economic assumptions of scarce resources. The energy crisis pivots on not having enough. In the name of national and economic security, we exercise influence in far-reaching places to secure enough energy. It is a worldview of scarcity. Billions starve because our culture operates with a system that limits distribution of goods and resources in order to protect the security of the few.

I’m guilty of this. I live out a vision of scarcity with my own checkbook, time and resources. This story of Jesus challenges me to re-imagine my life and live into an economy of God’s abundance. In the kingdom of God we don’t have to hoard—there is always enough supply to meet demand.