

Extravagant consumption

For Jesus, the inverse of scarcity isn't abundance—it's accumulation.

by [Melissa Florer-Bixler](#) in the [July 2023](#) issue



(Illustration by Daria Kirpach)

On communion Sundays, I bless the children in our congregation. One by one they stretch forth a palm or hold back their bangs as I make the sign of the cross with oil. This oil is held in a small stone vessel that fits in the palm of my hand. I skim the surface with the pad of my thumb and mark each child.

Each week I invite one of the children to offer me a blessing as well, to mark me with the sign of the cross. This Sunday it is Juliet who raises her hand, scooting forward on her knees as I hold out the vessel of oil to her.

She plunges her finger in, up to the first knuckle. I lean toward her as she marks a large cross on my forehead. The excess oil is dripping down her arm. The cross, glowing and bright, leaks down my face, into my eyebrows, and along the bridge of my nose. “Jesus loves you,” Juliet announces, unperturbed. She skips back to her seat, but I am rooted in place for a moment. There is so much oil.

Likely, my young church member has acted more faithfully to the biblical source of anointing with oil than I have. In the Torah, oil is most often not sprinkled but poured. Oil runs down the length of Aaron’s beard, facial hair that extends to the hem of his robe. Anointing involves a lot of oil. It is generous, abundant, excessive.

My Mennonite sensibilities are out of place in this ritual. I prefer restraint and moderation. I am content with my small portion. Holes in T-shirts are a sign of a well-loved garment, and I’ve resoled the same shoes several times over the past decade. As for many Anabaptists, the image of Jesus I am most comfortable with is the itinerant preacher who owned no property, had no privately held money, and lived with few worldly possessions.

And so it is an unsettling reminder that Jesus is often involved in extravagant consumption. The kingdom of God is like a wayward child who returns home after wasting half his father’s fortune—and in response his father throws him a lavish party. A shepherd, eschewing all sound financial advice and logic, leaves 99 sheep vulnerable while he goes off to search for the one. The kingdom of heaven is like a banquet for the poor.

There is much more. Jesus produces more wine at the first public miracle in Cana than could be drunk at a hundred weddings—and this after the guests are already drunk. The miracle of the feeding of the crowds in the wilderness produces 12 baskets of leftovers. Several times, Jesus and his followers are accused of gluttony and drunkenness.

Jesus’ financial advice is equally baffling for the fiscally responsible Christian. We are warned not to store our goods away and to give loans without hope of repayment. The taxation system that enriched the Herodians and the Roman Empire is relegated to a form of life beyond the service of God. We learn from Jesus not to plan for the future, for each day has enough trouble of its own. On more than one occasion Jesus mentions wealth in the same breath as damnation.

For Jesus, the inverse of scarcity isn't abundance—it is accumulation. And here, Hollis Phelps suggests, is the place where we might see the connection between Jesus' life without possessions and his encouragement of excessive consumption. Jesus is pleased to see people lavishly divest themselves of their possessions, and he laments when those who wish to follow him cannot because of their vast accumulation of wealth.

Wealth is power, and accumulation provides access to what we want. In our day, our time, devotion, life projects, and service are formed into the shape of debts and credits. Wealth is a religion, and mammon is a god. "Where God offers eternity," writes Philip Goodchild, "money promises the world. . . . Where God accepts all repentant sinners who truly believe, money may be accepted by all who are willing to trust in its value." One cannot serve both God and wealth.

Jesus' excesses deflate the power of mammon. The liturgies of economics we all recite—may I be creditworthy and debt free—evaporate in an eruption of feasts and parties, wine and fish. Such feasts further inflict damage on the socioeconomic prospects of their hosts when Jesus instructs that the poor be invited and honored. In first-century Judea, this is the stuff of business sabotage. In the disruptive economy of Jesus, feasting will yield no business contracts. Parties will generate no debt relations.

As with many people, my desire for simplicity and to use a minimum of the earth's resources is bound up in my concerns about our impending climate catastrophe. Conservation, I tell myself, will determine our future. This conviction sticks, even though I know it is mostly untrue. A church member who works on legislation for waste reduction reminds me that we cannot recycle our way out of planetary disaster. Only changes at the corporate and public policy levels will divert the disasters before us. Often cultural shame aimed at individual consumers functions to shift our attention from the actors primarily responsible for our creaturely survival. Our planetary futures depend upon an upheaval of our financial institutions, not merely our habits.

Shifting our gaze toward dependence on and collaboration with financial exploitation makes space for new possibilities in the way we conduct our lives as human creatures. We are released from a grinding asceticism that has its roots in the same soil as economic extraction. Instead of the expectation of conserving to pull ourselves up by our climate bootstraps, we are invited into a relationship of mutualism and care for other creatures—mourning their destruction but also

rejoicing in the excessive abundance and blessing of this earthly life.