

Sermons at  
First Lutheran Church (ELCA)  
Reggie Denton, Pastor

July 25, 2021 (Proper 12, Year B)  
John 6:1-21  
2 Kings 4:42-44  
Eph. 3:14-21

As you read the Bible, you find that one characteristic of servants of God is that they're able to look around them and see ABUNDANCE where others see SCARCITY.

A man comes to Elisha, bearing the first fruits of his crop that include twenty loaves of barley and fresh ears of grain. When Elisha commands him to give it to the PEOPLE to EAT, the man sees SCARCITY: He said, "HOW can I set this before a HUNDRED people?" He did the math: twenty loaves, some fresh ears...one HUNDRED people? No way on EARTH this SMALL amount of food will feed so MANY people.

A large crowd gathers around JESUS on a hill by the Sea of Galilee. Jesus asks where they are to buy bread for the crowd to eat. The disciples look around and see SCARCITY. First, Philip responds, "SIX months' WAGES wouldn't buy enough." Andrew's a LITTLE better, but not much: He says, "There's a boy here with five loaves and two fish. But what are THEY among so MANY?" They TOO can do the math. This time FIVE THOUSAND are hungry. There simply ISN'T enough food to go around.

SKEPTICS THINK like that. Nine-year-old Danny came bursting out of his Sunday school class like a wild animal. After a quick search, he grabbed his Daddy by the leg and yelled, "Man, that story of Moses and all those people crossing the Red Sea was great!" His father looked down, and smiled, and asked the boy to tell him about it.

"Well, the Israelites got out of Egypt, but Pharaoh and his army chased after them. So the Jews ran as fast as they could until they got to the Red Sea. The Egyptian Army was gettin' closer and closer. So ... um, Moses got on his walkie-talkie and told the Israeli Air Force to BOMB the Egyptians. While THAT was happening, the Israeli NAVY built a pontoon bridge so the people could cross over. They MADE it!"

By now old dad was shocked. "Is that the way they TAUGHT you the story?"

"Well, no, not exactly," Danny admitted, "but, dad, if I told you the way they told it to US, you'd NEVER believe it."

With childlike innocence the little boy put his finger on the pulse of our adult world, where cool skepticism reigns. Not even basic FACTS, like the world is round, are accepted by EVERYONE anymore. We live in a world of ALTERNATE facts. . . . And, of course, there is NO space for the MIRACULOUS.

"Jesus, what do you mean, GIVE them something to eat? We have only FIVE small loaves of bread and TWO fish. Those are the facts. Five and two. No more, no less. Send the five thousand people HOME; WE can't take care of them."

It's NOT that Elisha and Jesus DON'T see the numbers of hungry people needing to be fed. It's that they see MORE. They see GOD at WORK in what they DO have, IN and THROUGH the food that IS available. They see ABUNDANCE. It's the abundance of GOD that feeds ALL who are hungry, with PLENTY left over.

Which do YOU see: SCARCITY or ABUNDANCE?

I was watching the opening ceremony of the Olympics the other night, and during the parade of nations, they kept pointing out how SMALL some of the contingents were. 13 nations had only 2 athletes there. But how do you think those NATIONS felt, watching their flag enter the stadium? And how do you think the ATHLETES felt, how PROUD they felt to represent their country? Do you think

they CARED there was only 2 of them? No, they were grateful to BE there, and to raise THEIR flag JUST as high as EVERY OTHER nation in the world.

As you know, next year we will be sending our youth to the National Youth Gathering of the ELCA. MOST of the congregations that send youth to the gathering only send 2 or 3 kids, but when they come from all over the COUNTRY, from THOUSANDS of congregations, TOGETHER they mass 30 to 35,000 Lutherans. They do HUNDREDS of service projects, to leave it a little better place. Imagine each day, 10,000 kids WORKING at ONCE. And each town that sent only 2 or 3 or 23 MADE that possible.

Seeing ABUNDANCE where others see scarcity is a way of BEING. Henry Ford once said, "Whether you THINK you can or not, you are RIGHT." He also said that when he had a meeting with his engineers to brainstorm a new idea, he would put a sign out that said, "Check your slide-rules at the door." He did that because whenever he presented the problem, somebody would always take out their slide-ruler and say, "It CAN'T be done." But WITHOUT their slide-rulers, they always seemed to FIND a way. FACTS only got in the WAY. (Now for those of you who don't know what a slide-ruler is, ask your grandparents. That's what I had to do.)

Mother Teresa of Calcutta had a dream. She told her superiors, "I have three pennies and a dream from God to build an orphanage."

"Mother Teresa," her superiors chided her, "you can't build an orphanage with three pennies. With three pennies, you can't do ANYTHING."

"I know," she said, smiling, "but with GOD and three pennies I can do ANYTHING!" And she DID build that orphanage, and MANY more.

I recently heard about a little girl who died in a tenement house in Philadelphia around 1900. When they moved her body, they found a second-hand purse with 57 cents inside and a little note that read, "This is to help build the little church BIGGER, so MORE children can go to Sunday School."

When the pastor read that note, he knew right then what he had to do. Carrying the note to the pulpit, he told the story of her UNSELFISH gift. He challenged his deacons to get busy and raise enough money for the larger building.

But the story doesn't end there!

A NEWSPAPER learned of the story and PUBLISHED it. It was read by a REALTOR who offered them a parcel of land worth thousands of dollars. When told that the church couldn't pay that much, he OFFERED it for 57 cents.

Church members made large donations. Checks came from far and wide. Within five years the little girl's 57 cents had grown to \$250,000 — a HUGE amount of money in 1900. Her unselfish gift had MULTIPLIED.

The legacy of her gift is still there in Philadelphia. It's there in Temple Baptist Church, with a seating capacity of 3,300, and Temple University, where hundreds of students are trained. It's still there in Good Samaritan Hospital and in the Sunday School building the little girl ASKED for, which houses HUNDREDS of children. Which goes to show what GOD can do with 57 cents.

I pray that as God gives you dreams for the future, for your lives and for this church, you won't take out your slide-rulers and COUNT Mother Teresa's 3 pennies, or the little girl's 57 cents, or Elisha's twenty loaves and ears of grain, or Jesus' 5 loaves and 2 fish. In the words of St. Paul, "I pray that you may have the power to comprehend, with all the saints, what is the (TRUE) breadth and length and height and depth, and to know the love of Christ that SURPASSES knowledge, so that you may be filled with all the FULLNESS of God. Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish ABUNDANTLY FAR MORE than ALL we can ask or imagine, to HIM be glory ... to all generations, forever and ever. Amen" (Eph. 3:18-21).

A GIFT that's FAR more than we ask or imagine...hmm. Even in July, that's the heart of Christmas. Amen.