

Matthew 14:13-20 8/2/20 Pastor Bill Uetricht 9 Pentecost

When my boys were young, they would often protest that the other was getting the bigger piece of the cake than they were. In my head, I thought, well, maybe I need to get out the tape measure so that next time you both get precisely the same size piece.

When we would travel, our younger son would complain, Micah is looking through *my* window. Really? That window is yours. I'll remind you that you didn't happen to pay for that window or for this car. And honestly, you think a view through the window in the car is yours?

The Bible is really a cool book, not because everything described in it actually happened. You know better than that. But it's really cool because to me it so often feels like it has been driving in our cars with us, sitting at our dinner tables with us. The Bible at the beginning, through its amazing ability to tell stories that sure look like our lives, shows us ourselves in characters named Adam and Eve. These people are placed in a garden, that is, a place of abundance. Well, we discover that for these humans the gifts aren't enough. They don't want to be human; they want to be god.

So, Adam and Eve (that is, all of us) eat from the only tree that they are not supposed to. Isn't that typical? And then things really go downhill. Eve gives birth to a couple of boys—Cain and Abel. And I don't care to comment on the fact that what ensues is between a couple of males. I'll let you discuss that reality at home. But here's the deal: the boys don't get along. They complain that the other one is looking out their window, getting a bigger slice of cake. Sibling rivalry has landed on the scene. And it gets so bad that Cain kills Abel. The first consequence of sin is sibling rivalry. The Bible must be riding in our cars.

Sibling rivalry is based on what someone like Walter Brueggemann calls "an economy of scarcity." In this economy, the

goods of life are limited. There is only so much cake, you know, so you need to get out the yardstick, the tape measure to make sure that someone else doesn't get more than you.

Now truthfully, human systems do often operate out of scarcity. This is no illusion; it's reality. The Roman system which dominated the time of Jesus' ministry clearly functioned on the basis of scarcity. The folks in charge, well, they had big old banquets. They had all the food anybody could want. They got really big pieces of cake and had their own windows they could look out of. But that was only shared by some folks. There were lots of victims in this economy. Lots of folks were left out. That's how you could make sure that you, the rich ones, maintained your big piece of the cake. We discover in the Gospel of Matthew that John the Baptist was a victim of this economy that looks like abundance, but truly is one of scarcity.

What happens in the Gospel of Matthew right before today's story of the feeding of the 5000 is the description of the beheading of John that took place at one of Herod's big fancy, scarcity-driven banquets. This was a gathering, as David Lose says, for the "rich and the shameless." Herod's parties were designed for the few. Herod's parties were meant to highlight him. They were parties that *used* people, and, yes, even relied on violence to keep people out and under control. John the Baptist posed a threat to Herod and his family because he confronted some of their crazy, scarcity-driven behavior. Too often people in charge who are self-preoccupied and who long to maintain their power will do all kinds of violent things to keep those who threaten them under control. Somebody else gets a little power that means Herod has a lot less. So, John the Baptist's head ends up on a platter at Herod's party.

This is so different than the parties of Jesus. Jesus isn't hanging out with the rich and the shameless; he is hanging out with the crowds,

the common folks. He is being pursued by folks who are victims of the Roman system, folks who probably don't have much money or food. And what drives the kinds of parties that he throws is compassion, gut-moving, gut-wrenching compassion. "When he went ashore, he saw a great crowd; and he had the kind of compassion that comes out of your bowels for them, and [then he] cured their sick."

You see, it's not all about him. It's about those who are sick and need care. It's about the disciples whom Jesus says are to do the feeding. When the disciples come to Jesus and ask him to chase the crowds back to the villages where they could buy food for themselves, he says, "They need not go away; *you* give them something to eat." You've got a role to play. You've got a job to do. The compassion of Jesus knows how compassion works. It doesn't simply do things for people; it engenders new compassion. It puts people to work. Jesus put people to work. He musn't have been worried that if his disciples got some of the attention he would be receiving less. Jesus not only wanted to provide food for people; he wanted to share responsibility with others. The movement wasn't simply about him. The best leaders are the ones who can get out of the way, who can make room for the contributions and compassion of others.

And those leaders who can get out of the way are those who trust that what runs the show, what rules life is not scarcity, that which feeds sibling rivalry, but generosity, abundance. Cain killed Abel because Abel was a threat, because, you know, there is only so much to go around. Guess what, Jacob? If Micah looks out your window, that doesn't mean that you can't look out it, too. The views outside the window are big enough for both of you. There's more than enough to go around.

This is the fundamental truth of Christian faith. Michaela, Natalee, Logan, Tyler, Chase, Spencer, you've got to get this. As the

Psalmist says, “God is gracious and merciful, slow to anger and abounding in steadfast love. The Lord is good to all, and his compassion is over all that he has made.” Life is not an experience of stinginess; life is an experience of abundant generosity. That is the point of the story about the feeding of the 5000. There’s so much generosity in life that there are even leftovers for others.

You don’t need to be fighting off others, pulling out the tape measure every time you turn around, worried that they will get a bigger piece of the cake than you. There’s enough to go around. You aren’t being left out. If some people (call them “black people”) who haven’t gotten a lot of attention for centuries get a little attention, there’s no reason for you to whine and complain.

In God, there is more than enough to go around. In God, there is generosity heaped upon generosity. In God there is love heaped upon love. In God, scarcity doesn’t rule; abundance does. And God’s abundance includes you. So, life doesn’t have to be a competition. Life doesn’t have to be about putting others down so that you feel better about yourself. Life doesn’t have to be about keeping score, holding grudges, discovering ways to make sure that the attention is not on others but rather is on you. What a miserable way to live! What a recipe for crabbiness!

Trusting in abundance, however, leads to contentment, to joy. When generosity rules, you can rejoice with others who win; you can be glad when they get some of the attention. You won’t need to be the Cain who kills the Abel.

You didn’t get as much cake this time? Get over yourself! And by the way, when you get over yourself, you are going to discover yourself and be discovered by a life that is phenomenally rich, abundant.