

From the earliest days, rulers have used the threat of scarcity to maintain their powers. Pharaoh claimed he could take away the sun; Caesar warned that only he could bring peace; And presidents are quick to remind us that it's only their administrations that can guarantee safety.

The light of day, the Pax Romana, the American Dream, all of these things are rooted in scarcity, rooted in the fear of a zero-sum-gain world. There's this idea that there aren't enough resources for everyone to thrive. In any age, there's been a small subset of people who have had access to a faucet of resources – just turn the tap, and you can have all you need. But like children who have not yet learned to preserve water, the powerful delight in the run-off; it's theirs for the keeping. And every time the masses – those neighbors who have to walk to the well – ask for access to the tap, here comes that narrative of scarcity.

Make no mistake, this narrative of scarcity prioritizes things over people; it says property, the right to act without empathy, and even the right to throw away half of the Big Gulp that you would have never finished anyway – the right to own or to waste or to consume something – is more valuable than the welfare of our neighbors. It says stuff is important, and people, specifically marginalized people, are disposable.

This narrative was most evident earlier in the week in Kenosha, Wisconsin, when after the tragic, unnecessary, and unjust shooting of Jacob Blake, the city mayor began a press conference condemning violence against...property, before eventually adding violence against people shortly thereafter. The prioritization was re-emphasized later that evening when a vigilante teenager mowed down two more lives with a long gun.

I am sick and tired of this sick and tired message of scarcity; the message of scarcity not only results in the systemic abuse and even disposal of marginalized persons, especially our black and brown neighbors, but it also does so under the false guise of rootedness in Jesus. Jesus didn't fly banners, and even if he did, scarcity wouldn't have been the one he hoisted.

Caesar's world wields the threat of scarcity. But God's world, God's world extends an invitation to abundance. And Jesus spent a lifetime offering hospitality to his neighbors.

Today's lesson, an excerpt of Paul's letter to the Church at Rome, includes an exhortation by Paul for Christians to pursue what Eleazar Fernandez calls "the hospitality of justice." This is a litany of generosity and empathy.

If you read the news, though, you wouldn't know it, because Paul has been coopted and distorted, maybe even more than Jesus. His ministry was an arc of transformation: a close-minded zealot became a zealous pursuer of God's love. I'm not arguing that he wasn't a curmudgeon, nor that he was warm and fuzzy. But rather than see one who evolved to write of selfless love in Philippians, or who spoke of an inseparable divine love in this very letter, tradition has chosen to cherry-pick minor comments, many from letters not even authentic to his own pen, and mutate Paul into an ambassador of scarcity. Tradition, not text, seeks to take the rigidity of Paul's youth, and ignore the welcoming wisdom of his seasoned years. There is an assumption, a false, dangerous, assumption that both Jesus and Paul operate in scarce markets.

Well let me tell you something: following Jesus cannot be reduced to reciting God's name in a pledge any more than deciphering Paul can be reduced to a magistrate's definition of legal marriage. Neither Jesus nor Paul presented a depiction of God as some kind of cosmic actuary doling out risk assessments for grace and human worth. They painted the picture of abundance, a God who transcends economics, and politics, and war, and consumption.

Jesus and Paul shared this abundance (and still do!), over and against the backdrop of Rome, which insisted (and still does) that the world is scarce, too scarce for ideas, too scarce for community, too scarce to believe in God's possibilities, too scarce to have security, peace, and light in the company of neighbors.

I would encourage you to read, and reread, and keep rereading today's lection. It's all wonderful. But I want you to focus on one phrase: of our enemies, Jordan translates Paul's advice: "Bread them, and water them."

Caesar's world offers troughs not tables – he throws the scraps from the table, and delights as the desperate clamor for crumbs. And the thought of an enemy having enough is counter-intuitive: why should someone Caesar loathes, someone who doesn't even share in his humanity be offered essentials? It does him no good, does it?

God's world, on the other hand, invites everyone to the banquet, even our enemies. Because we can't become neighbors until we acknowledge our mutual dependence on God and one another. When Jesus shared his last meal, he did so with disciples who would abandon and betray him, something that would be considered wasteful in a world of scarcity. But in a world of abundance, such actions reveal infinite qualities. Status can only last for so long, can only sustain us for so long. But bread, and water, and friendship, these are the things that transcend life! How can a mix of flour and yeast, and a strange combination of hydrogen and oxygen, and the gooeyness of heart-touches be such a big deal? Because Caesar's world, and its scarcity tell us what we have to be. But God's world, and its abundance, tell us what we already are, God's beloved, and what we can be, God's possibility.

When we follow the ritual Paul laid out for us: to say the words, and break the bread, and share the cup, we aren't checking the box for a good deed or completing a transaction for divine salvation, or declaring our loyalty to the rulers of the realm. We, like Jesus, are declaring our willingness to live in abundance rather than cower in scarcity. We share our bread – that is our heart, our mind, our soul, our gifts, not in hopes of pleasing our patrons, but rather to help reveal, embrace, and experience God's enough-ness. When we break bread, or share our resources, or just offer dignity, be it to our family, to our friends, to our enemies, even to those who sway along the spectrum of relationship, we recognize in them, the same value, the same amount of possibility, the same love of God, that we see in ourselves.

Friends, there's a kingdom, where even our enemies have bread; where even those who are evil can learn good; where dialogue and bread and wine can breed unlikely friendships; where our value can be seen beyond skin color or zip code; where God can work wonders in one person, and still have more than enough to work wonders in every other person; Friends, there's a kingdom of abundance.

Abundance Not Scarcity
Bob Stillerman
Proper 17, Thirteenth Sunday after Pentecost, 8/30/2020
Romans 12:9-21



a spiritually
progressive
community
of faith

May, we, the Church at Sardis, bread and water those around us, in order that such a kingdom of abundance may burst into an era of scarcity. Friends, may it be so, and begin right now!!! Amen.