

## God's Abundance vs. Our Scarcity

It's the same story, told a hundred different ways. Google "Mainline Protestant Church" and the ever helpful computer will try to help you complete the search with words like: "attendance", "decline", "losing members." Click on one of those suggested searches and hundreds of thousands of articles, opinions, blogs, and videos will come to the forefront about how the mainline protestant church is in a state of perpetual decline. It is so easy to see the world from a place of scarcity – we do not have enough. Enough people, enough money, enough energy in our churches.

We often hear people talking about how there is not enough. If we turn on the television or if we sit down for conversation with strangers or friends, we will hear the same theme. Many of us feel there is just not enough. There is not enough time, we don't get enough out of our jobs, our partner doesn't do enough of the chores, we don't have enough resources, we don't have enough to retire. We may hear similar conversations in the fellowship halls of mainline churches...there are not enough people coming to church, young people are not as interested in church. We don't have enough money to hire a youth minister. What if the boiler gives out? How will we pay for it?

This tendency to think we do not have enough is the scarcity model. It's essentially the belief that we do not have enough. This belief is coupled with the idea that by accumulating more things we will be happier. The media is constantly telling us we need more. We need more beauty, more technology, more style, a bigger house, more time saving devices, and more getaway adventures. The basic idea is that if we only had more we would be happier. The scarcity model extends to the mainline church. If we only had more young families, more pledges, more Facebook 'likes', more, more, more, then everything would be alright. Living in an attitude of scarcity, we may ask, has God abandoned our churches and left us with not enough?

The scripture today is a promise that God will not abandon us, that God has not left us without enough. In the scripture we hear God saying, "For surely I know the plans I have for you, says the Lord, plans for your welfare and not for harm, to give you a future with hope. Then when you call upon me and come and pray to me, I will hear you." This is a promise of God that turns our scarcity way of thinking upside down. We are promised a "future with hope." These are promises God made to a people in exile, but they are promises to us as well. The promise is, that through God, all things are possible. We have a future with hope. And though that future may look different, and we may have to start thinking about abundance in a different way than numbers, we are promised, and shown by God, a future with hope.

Think for a moment about the story of Jesus feeding the thousands with just a few loaves and fishes. The disciples, the crowds, everyone doubted that there would be enough. Surely there wasn't enough. But Jesus showed us that with God things are abundant and not scarce.

It's easy to fall into the scarcity model of thinking and ask along with the disciples, "How on earth are we going to feed all these people. There is no food in the desert. It would take a year's wages to feed all these people. We are up a creek without a paddle." But the disciples have it all wrong. The song is not "Count your shortcomings, count them one by one." It's "Count your blessings, count them one by one." Sure there are tough things in our histories and in our life and in our relationships and in our jobs. Corporate downsizing and people failing on their mortgage payments is a sobering reality that many are faced with today. It is easy to recall all the things that are lacking in our relationships, in our lives, in our job, et cetera. Every person,

every relationship, every job, and every wall of our house has its down side. On any given day we could think of ten reasons not to get out of bed. On any given day we could also think of all we have to be thankful for, compared to most in the world.

So there are two roads. One is thinking inside the box and asking “How on God’s earth are we going to feed all these people.” The other is thinking outside the box, looking at all the options, then asking “How many loaves and fishes do we have?” This difference in approach makes all the difference.

The people God promises in today’s scripture were unlikely to see a future with hope. They were unlikely to look around them and see all that they had, to “count their blessings”, as one might say. They were in exile, cut off from all that was familiar. The prophet Jeremiah knew they would be living in a place of scarcity and yet he reminds them that God does hear their prayers, God has not abandoned them. Jeremiah reminds them that their lives may not look like they once did, and it may never again, but that does not mean they are without hope. This is a message that is important for us to hear today as well.

The over-whelming narrative is we do not have enough. That narrative is so powerful, it can be difficult to see all that we *do* have. Perhaps what we need is a new way of measuring our abundance – a new way of seeing all that we have and the ways in which our churches are growing and thriving. It takes a new way of thinking.

Consider this story. Many years ago, late one night a young student pastor was gathered with the youth of the church she was serving for a lock-in. The young ones ranged in age from 8-14 years old. There were several other adults helping the student pastor, but at the moment they were upstairs setting up for evening devotions while the pastor and the kids were in the church basement playing games. It was dark outside already and it was storming, but luckily, in the old church basement, the thunder couldn’t be heard, so the pastor was confident the kids wouldn’t be frightened. However, as she was getting ready to gather the kids up for another game, the power in the church went out. All of the sudden the loud and bright church basement was thrown into complete blackness. The kids, at one point shouting and playing loudly, were in stunned, and undoubtedly frightened silence. The young student pastor started to panic and the kids started to cry. How was she to keep the kids calm until she could find a flashlight, or at the very least find a couple of the other adults to help her out. As the student pastor wondered about what to do, all of the sudden a weak red light appeared in the middle of the room. The source was coming from one of the little girls who had been playing just moments ago. This little girl was now dancing in place, keeping her feet moving with the energy that can only be found in children. And because her feet were always moving, there was always light. You see, she was wearing those shoes that light up each time a step is taken. And because those shoes were all the rage back then, soon the other kids began to dance as well, and the faint glow grew. Tears were turned into laughter, fear into hope. The thought they did not have what they needed vanished as they realized all the light necessary was right there at their feet. From scarcity to abundance, they danced their way around the church.

Learning to see our churches, our spiritual lives, the work of God in the world as alive and powerful can seem like a daunting task. It is true there may not be as many people in our pews today, it is true it takes more and more creativity to build our ministries with fewer financial resources, but all it takes is to truly look at all we have and realize it is abundant. The faithful people of the United Church of Christ continue to make waves of social movement, from serving those right outside our doors to marching with thousands of others to advocate for change and equality. We hear stories of people whose lives will never be the same because of a

visit to one of our churches, a conversation with one of our members, a blog post written by a member of our faithful. Ours is a vibrant and vital church. A church of abundance. And it doesn't have to take being plunged into darkness to realize all that we do have. All it takes is looking around us, and remembering God's promise to the exiles in Jeremiah's text and to us today: "I know the plans I have for you...plans for your welfare...to give you a future with hope."

God calls us to believe in abundance, to believe in the power of the Spirit, to believe that the church can be as alive now as in the time of the Apostles. Our scripture does not say whatever is lacking, whatever is a problem, whatever is painful, whatever is not there—meditate on these things. Our scripture does say whatever is true, wherever the spirit is moving, whatever is amazing, meditate on these things. And the Bible is filled with stories of thinking outside the box and with stories of abundance...the feeding of the five thousand...turning water into wine...the miraculous healing... These are all stories of abundance! May each of us in our own way unlearn scarcity and open our eyes to the blessings before us and the abundance around us. Every person sitting here today has so much to be thankful for and every church in our conference has what it needs to thrive. When we focus on what we do have and what is there before our eyes it changes everything. God will provide what we need to thrive. Today we celebrate that our God is a God of abundance.