

“Fear Not Scarcity”  
Matthew 14:13-21  
A Sermon Preached by the Rev. Douglas M. Donley  
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University Baptist Church  
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Throughout the Lenten Season, we have been focusing on the Biblical admonition to Fear Not. It’s mentioned over 350 times in Scripture, meaning there was a lot to fear back then, just as there is a lot to fear now. The Christian posture is to focus on something more powerful than fear. That’s our goal for this season as we traverse toward Easter. Already, we have considered fearing not the wilderness or our comfortable secrets. Next week, we’ll look at fearing not the storms, followed by the crowds. On Palm Sunday we’re going to look at fearing not, we children of the promise. Finally on Easter we will fear not the empty tomb. Today, inspired by today’s scripture reading, we will fear not scarcity.

Fear is a scare tactic. It makes you doubt yourself, your resources. It squelches hope. It makes you suspicious. Fearing scarcity makes us hold tighter to what we have. It tells us to look out for number one. It tells us to be prepared for whatever drought or failure of the electric grid. Be a survivalist for yourself only. Beware of others, they want to steal your stuff. But Jesus reminds us to fear not our scarcity. Instead, remember your resilience.

We know the story of the feeding of the multitude so well. It’s told more often in the Bible than any other story. Six times it’s told. It’s as if the Bible is telling us to pay attention. We know how the crowds were pressing in on Jesus and that he felt obligated to feed them. We also know about the scarce resources that the disciples had: five loaves and two fish. And we know that by some miracle— some magic from Jesus or was it the finding of resources they didn’t know they had—everyone was fed so much that there were twelve baskets leftover.

Now, I want to focus on two things that might not get looked at as much. The first is the contrast of this meal with the one that proceeds it in the Bible. The other is the fact that Jesus tried to get away to a deserted place. Maybe through this examination, we can look with new eyes upon the popular story of the loaves and fishes and it will give us a reminder of who Jesus was and who we are to be.

First of all, let’s go back a few verses to the beginning of the 14<sup>th</sup> chapter. Matthew tells the story of a birthday party thrown by Herod for Herod. Not everyone was invited to this party. It was a party of the elites. It goes without saying that there was plenty of food. There was also intrigue at the party. You could make an entire Netflix series based on this one party. You see, Herod wanted to have a dangerous liaison with Herodias who just happened to be the wife of his

half-brother Phillip. Since John the Baptist said it wasn't right for Herod to be involved in such an incestuous relationship, Herod had him arrested. If you tell the king what to do and what not to do, you pay the price.

The people who were at the party were Herod's friends and accomplices. They didn't dare cross him, for they knew about his wrath. At the party, Herodias' daughter danced one heck of a dance. Herod was so pleased that he promised her whatever she wanted, up to half of his kingdom. At her mother's encouragement, she asked for the head of John the Baptist on a platter. Herod, not wanting to go against his promises to a guest at his own party granted her wish. Herod got rid of his harshest critic while seeming chivalrous. That's one twisted dinner party and a host whose priorities are mighty messed up.

It's no accident that the next story in the Gospel is of a different kind of party. It's not thrown in a palace. It's thrown on a lakeshore. Everyone is invited. No one is turned away. Everyone gets food and it never comes at the expense of the innocent. The propaganda of the day was that the gods provided food for people through the emperor. Jesus showed that God's will is that people should be fed, even in spite of the emperor. This was real hospitality and it's as much a miracle as the so-called multiplication of the loaves.

This brings me to the second thing I wanted to point out this morning. This event happened right after Jesus heard about the death of John the Baptist, his friend, his teacher, his co-conspirator, his kin, his predecessor. When Jesus heard about John's brutal killing, he went off in a boat to a deserted place. He and John had been kin in the faith and had made similar friends and enemies, including Herod. Jesus, I imagine, wondered if his fate would be the same as John's. He was angry at Herod, at Herodias, at all of the people who stood by watching it happen and saying nothing. He got another cruel reminder that the road is hard and the work is seemingly never done. So he went off to a place to be by himself—to feel the scarcity of losing a loved one. He needed to grieve for his lost cousin, to contemplate, to reconnect, to rejuvenate, perhaps to reconsider some things about himself. This is what we do when someone significant in our life dies.

But he could not be alone. The crowds followed him with their very real needs of food and hope. Jesus obliged, as we all knew he would. But what about his need to go to a deserted place? We'll see it again in next week's scripture from this same chapter. Jesus never seems to be able to get away.

It seems to me that when John the Baptist died, the message that Jesus was trying to convey lost one of its biggest proponents. And when Jesus heard of John's death, he retreated to the only wilderness he could find—the sea. Jesus was in the lonely place of having to tell the story, having to show the story, having to be the story all by himself. He was in that lonely place of despair that we have experienced at one time or another—where we have to decide whether

we are willing to take up that mantle, that cross, that platter and move forward. How do we deal with the scarcity of a lost loved one?

Jesus went off in that boat to that deserted place, thinking that everything was lost. And yet there were his disciples, some of whom were likely John's disciples, too. They were mourning just like Jesus. And I bet they held him up and propped him up. They became each other's support, their external brains. I bet they strategized and imagined together a way forward.

Jesus went on to give an object lesson of real hospitality. He went on to show what a real inclusive feast is like. It's like a miracle.

Jesus' miracle was not the multiplication of loaves and fishes. It was to focus not on their scarcity, but on their resilience. It was reminding people that we are responsible for each other. And when we are, there is plenty to go around. Heck there are even leftovers.

In the wilderness, Jesus was tempted to turn stones in to bread. Jesus did not do this for himself. But when others were hungry, he maybe sat them down in groups and had them brainstorm how they could feed each other. What stores do you have? What friends do you have in the nearby village? The Romans have told you that you have nothing—that scarcity is your lot in life. But look at you. There are five thousand of you, maybe 10,000. He did not tell them to arm themselves. He did not tell them to protest. He told them to look out for each other.

They formed their own social enterprise. Maybe they called it Loaves and Fishes, but you never heard the people talk about being hungry ever again.

Fear not scarcity.

Remember the early days of the pandemic where everyone was fearing the scarcity of toilet paper? I remember the worries about food, until I looked at my freezer and my cupboards. There was more food there than I had realized. We started thinking about how we could share it. We still do that. When George Floyd was killed and neighborhoods lost the businesses that were their livelihood, pop up food shelves appeared, especially near protest or remembrance sites.

The community was saying Fear not scarcity. We got you.

There was a story a few weeks ago about how rural foodshelves have not seen the demand that they were preparing for. Is that because people are taking care of each other? That unemployment and stimulus checks are helping stem the tide? Food shelves are temporary things, or at least they are designed to be.

We have helped our unsheltered neighbors through our little free library/foodshelf on University Avenue. Just yesterday we joined with several other churches to have drop-in day for our housing-challenged neighbors. In addition to warmth and food, we offered them haircuts and other direct services. But mostly we offered hospitality and dignity.

When dealing with the multiple setbacks and delays in our Asylum guests' quest for food and dignity, they will constantly say, "It's okay, Dios es Bueno". It's not just a platitude. It

means fear not scarcity. God is good all the time, all the time God is good. There will be a way through the wilderness. If we keep on keeping on. If we pull together and work together. If we care enough to care enough. That's the God-spark that we tend to and nurture as a community of faith.

Beloved friends, if you are feeling scarcity, remember that you are not alone. Remember that there are those out there who love you and who want the best for you.

If you are not in that place, remember that someone else might well need the reminder of your presence, your support, your love, your comfort, your listening ear, your generous spirit.

We are each other's response to scarcity. We hold each other close and we grant for each other hope and purpose and blessing.

Fear not scarcity. It reminds us of what is important. It reminds us that God has not left us comfortless. It reminds us of who we are to be. And when we remember that, then this meal that we are about to celebrate becomes not only a time when we remember the last supper, but it also reminds us that scarcity is not the last word. These elements remind us of the miracle of trust. They remind us of the miracle of generosity. They remind us of the miracle of hope. Fear not scarcity.

Thanks be to God who has not and will not abandon us. Amen.