

Sunday, August 2<sup>nd</sup>, 2020

Pentecost 9A

Readings: Genesis 32:3-32, Psalm 17:1-7, 15, Romans 9:1-5, Matthew 14:13-21

## Scarcity?

### An Economics of Abundance

#### Introduction

These last few weeks we followed the lectionary readings from chapter 13, of Matthew's Gospel: the chapter about the Kingdom: the parables of the sower, the wheat and the weeds, the mustard seed, and the yeast. Today, we move onto a new story: the famous "loaves and fishes". You would have sat through copious sermons, meditations, homilies on this reading, and no doubt can offer your own interpretation. Don't worry I won't ask you for that this morning: another time! But I guess you could nod in agreement if I were to sum up the thrust of the several 'takes' that are given: a miracle story of Jesus feeding hungry people; a story that anticipates a final feast when the kingdom comes where all will be fed; a lesson in unselfishness and the ethic of sharing; and finally, a story that points to the sacrament of holy communion and the idea of community. Well, all of those are good and legitimate, sound and credible. But..., I would like to handle this story a little differently, laying hold of it, as a source of criticism of the way we think about the world, about community, the way we think about ourselves. So, let's begin, with an observation.

#### The Way We See Reality

I suspect that when we look at the world, we see it as one of general scarcity, shortage, insufficiency: where there is *not enough for all*. In fact, I was first formally introduced to this idea in Micro-Economics 101, where a basic axiom or assumption, is this: "Coping with scarcity is the essence of the human condition" The school of thought that developed the idea that economics and economic management is all about allocating scarce resources, so as to maximize "efficiency" was referred to as the School of Marginalism that grew up in 19<sup>th</sup> century Britain. Basically, this idea of maximizing efficiency of resource use, was developed on the back of mathematical theory derived from the exact world of physics. Fascinated by truth through science, as Victorian Britain was, economists tried to ape it, to copy it. After all, to make economics a science, they supposed, would give it greater weight, greater prestige. Now, building a rational approach to economics was laudable, but to assume the market as a rational entity through which precision can be assured, was and remains deluded. Behind that however there *was* and there *is* another question, a more important question than the vanity of economists striving to become scientists; and it is this: *are resources really scarce, do we really live in a resource deficient world?* Certainly, there are limits to the earth's resources, but to say they are scarce, may be taking it too far. With that question in mind let's turn to the story of the loaves and fishes.

#### The Story of the Loaves and Fishes

In the story, we find that Jesus sees before him a curious, famished crowd. His response is noteworthy: we are told he "had compassion". The term used for this emotion, has a history: it goes back to the old Greek translation of the Hebrew word, for the ripped -out entrails of the animal victim, in the ancient Jewish sacrificial cult. In our reading, Matthew uses the same word, but inverts its significance. Rather than referring to a merciless ripping out of the heart from a dead animal, Jesus "heart goes out to them". But what does this heartfelt response lead to? It is not

just about, miraculously producing food. The issue here is about Jesus' *opposition to and challenge of* the sacred rules of the Jewish community with which he is dealing. These people, hungry as they are, are religious first: they would rather hold-onto their dietary laws – preoccupied with the legal minutiae of clean and unclean food – *artificially producing scarcity of supplies*, than in the name of human need and justice, *sharing their bread, sharing what they have*. The rules make for scarcity, but graciousness, Jesus' graciousness, makes for abundance, and through it, social cohesion, community.

## **Back to Reality**

The sacred Hebrew dietary rules were the culprit in promoting scarcity: something which Jesus decries. For Jesus, God has provided abundantly for the sake of community: what John's Gospel would refer to as the *glory of God*.

Why then are we so taken with the idea of scarcity in a world of plenty? Some would say greed. In the end, it is the human predisposition to greed, honed through money that makes scarcity of abundance. There may be something in that. The philosopher, John Locke, who had a fairly sunny reading of the human condition, nevertheless blamed money for the problem of scarcity. In his *Second Treatise of Civil Government* (1690), he argued that in our natural state, there is more than enough for human beings, for human society. But he adds, that the development of money in the market place, spelt our death-knell, through a cultural change, a change of attitude and behaviour. What he meant was this: that with money people could begin the process of *storing value in things that don't decay*: in his words, "that a little piece of yellow metal, which would keep without wasting or decay, should be worth a great piece of flesh" (Locke. § 37). With the introduction of money, he pointed out, it became possible to accumulate wealth, and there no longer existed an upper limit for what one individual naturally could own. The desire for more than one needed and the ability to get it, leads to scarcity. Twenty-first century thinker, Charles Eisenstein thinks similarly: that money is the problem. Scarcity is built into money: the way it is created and circulated. He asks, "Could it be that money itself causes the perception of scarcity? Could it be that money, synonymous with security and abundance, ironically brings the opposite?"

Locke and Eisenstein get very close to the biblical mark: remember the apostle Paul's dictum: the love of money is the root of all evil (1 Timothy 6:10) But, I would put it in a more contextual way. The problem today, in a nutshell, is this: that economics and economic activity are no longer embedded in social relations: rather economy and society, economy and community, have been separated apart, been split. Markets form a separate realm, distinct and independent of the community. This is the new reality...the housing crisis in this country is a classic example of it. Housing is for investors, not for people who actually want to live in them. Scarcity is created artificially by free market economic practice, because prices represent the interests of people who *have* rather than people who *have not*.

The story of the loaves and fishes, is about an economics that is connected, not disconnected from the community, an economic practice that celebrates abundance for all. This, is Jesus' concern.