



SCARCITY AND PLENTY

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I Kings 17: 8-16

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Theme: Though we often feel scarcity, most of us have plenty of what we need.

We come here for reasons as varied as are we, O God. By your grace, surprise us again with your word in Holy Scripture. May it bring us more than we even know how to ask for. And now may the words of my mouth and the meditation of my heart be acceptable in your sight, O Lord, my Rock and my Redeemer. Amen.

That curious story about the Old Testament prophet Elijah Daniel just read to us can be heard at different levels. At one level, it's a straight-up miracle story, a tale about a jar of meal that never goes empty. But like most of the Bible, you need to dig deeper. The first sermon Jesus ever preached was based on this very story. In that sermon, recorded in the Fourth Chapter of Luke, Jesus took the starving widow of Zarephath in another direction altogether. He pointed out what everybody in that Nazareth synagogue knew, namely that the widow and her son whom Elijah saved were *not* Jewish. Zarephath, their hometown, was notorious heathen country. Jesus points out that God might have pointed Elijah toward some nice starving *Jewish* widow to save, but didn't. Just like Elijah, Jesus concludes, His own message of salvation would be for all of hungry humanity, not just the Jewish corner. That was Jesus' sermon to preach, hardly mine.

This last week I dug out a scholarly paper a friend of mine wrote about this story. In that paper she concluded that its basic theological thrust is an affirmation of God's eternal choice of life over death. She suggests that it's a sort of harbinger of Easter, that later and consummate triumph of life over death. I think she's probably right. Maybe that's a sermon for another day.



The edge of the story that resonates with me today is reflected in the title I chose for this sermon – *scarcity and plenty*. The basic plot of the tale is just that – scarcity and plenty. First, there’s extreme scarcity. We meet the widow gathering sticks to make a fire to prepare her last meal, after which she plans to lay down with her son and die. Then there’s extreme plenty – a jar of meal that never goes empty – enough, *more* than enough, to feed the widow *and* her boy *and* Elijah, maybe enough for the whole village!

The world we live in, our nation, our City, is haunted by an ever-sharper sense of economic inequity – a contemporary narrative of scarcity versus plenty. Statistics indicate that the rich among us are indeed getting richer. More accurately, the *very* rich are getting *very* richer. And at the other end of the economic spectrum many people are either stuck, or stretching to make ends meet, or not making ends meet. A lot of people sense that they are getting poorer while working the same job they’ve had for years. This sense of disparity between plenty and scarcity surfaced a few years ago in the “Occupy Wall Street” movement; it’s implicit in the loaded talk about the “one percent” and “the rest of us.” It’s playing out in the approaching presidential election. Donald Trump is a populist champion of working white folks who feel passed over by the disparities they perceive. Bernie Sanders is a self-avowed democratic socialist ready to gleefully wage class warfare. But both are playing on the theme – scarcity and plenty.

There are far too many people in this world for whom scarcity is very real – not enough to eat, no affordable place to live, some of them blocks from where we sit. *You and I, however, are not among them.* You know it; I know it. Nevertheless, most of us have had *experiences* in which we felt scarcity.

Some years ago, when I was a younger minister in another city, I experienced what I perceived – in the moment – as scarcity. I recall the day vividly. I drove up to an ATM machine to withdraw 35 dollars for something – a pizza dinner for the family maybe. I reached out the car window, put my bankcard in the machine, and punched the buttons for my 35 dollars, only to see a message pop up on the screen that read, “*insufficient funds.*” That account contained my *only* funds, no “sufficient funds” elsewhere. I was embarrassed... *by an ATM machine!* I



experienced scarcity with a capital “S.” But note this – and here’s the ironic point – I had pulled up to that ATM in a very fine two-year-old leased automobile – a really nice car – which I then sheepishly drove home to my really nice four-bedroom house on the 7th fairway of a golf course. I actually had plenty, plenty with a capital “P.”

The May issue of the *Atlantic Monthly* ran a remarkable piece by a writer named Neal Gabler. The article was entitled “*The Secret Shame of Middle-Class Americans.*” It begins, “*Since 2103, the Federal Reserve Board has conducted a survey to ‘monitor the financial and economic security of American consumers.’ Most of the data in the latest survey, frankly, are less than earth-shattering... But one answer to one question was astonishing. The Fed asked respondents how they would pay for a \$400 emergency. The answer: 47 percent of respondents said they would either cover the expense by borrowing or selling something, or they would not be able to come up with the \$400 at all. Four hundred dollars! Who knew?*” Gabler asks rhetorically. Then he confesses, “*Well I knew, I knew because I am in that 47 percent. I know what it is like to juggle creditors... I know what it is to be down to my last \$5 – literally – while I wait for a paycheck.*” Gabler is naming something like the scarcity the widow of Zarephath knew in extremis.

But like my experience that day at the ATM, his scarcity is not so simple. Gabler goes on to admit, “*you would never know any of that to look at me..., I have had a passably good career as a writer – five books, hundreds of articles, and number of awards and fellowships... You wouldn’t even know it to look at my tax return... I don’t ask for or expect sympathy... I am responsible for my quagmire – no one else... I have it a lot better than many, probably most, Americans – which is my point. Maybe we all screwed up.*”

There’s something in most all of us that always wants more, always thinks we need more, something that’s always pushing desire to the limit. At this last Thursday’s Men’s Bible Study, one of the guys told an anecdote he’d heard about the notoriously ambitious pop star, Madonna. Madonna was asked what her goal in life was. “To fill Giant Stadium” was the answer, something she achieved in the summer of 1987. 80,000 people. “And when you’ve done that, then what?” “Fill



Wembley Stadium.” Wembley, in London, holds 90,000 people. Such ambition begs a follow-up question, of course, “And then what? And *then* what?”

Some years ago, the British newspaper columnist Bernard Levin, wrote these words in an op-ed piece. “*Countries like ours are full of people who have all the material comforts they desire... and yet lead lives of quiet, and at times noisy, desperation, understanding that however much food and drink they pour into it, however many motor cars and television sets they stuff into it..., it still aches.*”

We always seem to ache for more. I’m *not* here this morning to discourage striving. I’m merely reminding us of what we know – the “more” that really fills us, the “more” that truly sustains us, the “more” that brings lasting joy, cannot be bought. It cannot be acquired. It cannot even be achieved.

A friend of mine once told me about a trip he made with his young daughter to one of those immense indoor shopping malls with a thousand stores lined up side-by-side. Their minds numbed as they wandered the maze of stuff, the wise young girl said to her father, “*Dad, there’s nothing we need here.*”

What we need, you and I, what we really need, is free, free for the asking. In that curious Bible story we heard, God gives the widow, and her son, and Elijah what they need. They’re fed. In a few moments, you and I are about to be given what we really need. Like the widow on the edge of desperation, we’re about to be fed.

The Sacrament of Communion emblematically offers us what we really need – *God and each other*. As real food nourishes our bodies, God and human relationship are what finally nourish our souls.

We have a God-shaped hole in our hearts that only God can fill. We ache for That-Which-Is-Beyond-Us, the Nexus of Meaning, the Source of Purpose, the Divine Love we name God.

And we ache for human relationships, relationships of love and trust – in church, in family, in friendship. Humans are built for relationships; without them we starve.



Communion offers both – God and community. It's for free, free for the asking.
And there's plenty, no scarcity at all.

In the name of the Father and of the Son and of the Holy Spirit. Amen.