



Lakeside Sermons

Lakeside Baptist Church • Rocky Mount, North Carolina
Jody C. Wright, Senior Minister

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The Twenty-third Sunday after Pentecost

Psalm 65; Luke 18:9-14 Famine or Feast?

It is one of those odd memories that gets tattooed in your brain so that, from time to time, when you turn a certain way, you see it again. I was about twelve or thirteen years old, still too young to drive, but old enough to come and go without much worry. My two best friends and I had enjoyed a full summer's morning of riding bikes, swimming at the pool, and doing other things that boys like to do. My house was closest to the pool, so at lunch time we jumped on our bikes and headed there. I got out the paper plates, the bread, the mayonnaise and mustard, the lettuce and tomatoes from the garden, and the package of ham slices that was a staple in our house. We joked and laughed and, with typical adolescent appetites, set about to make our sandwiches. Then I panicked.

I watched in horror as my two best buddies piled their bread high with ham slices—one, two, three, four, five! I wanted to tell them to stop, but I didn't want to be rude. You see, with three always-hungry boys around the table at every meal, we never wasted anything. Therefore, we were a one-slice-of-ham family. One slice of ham plus the other fixings made a perfectly good sandwich and helped to stretch the family grocery budget. I was watching my friends wipe out a week's worth of sandwiches in one sitting!

It was one of the worst meals I ever had. My friends' sandwiches looked decadent and delicious while mine (with one piece of ham) tasted dry and doughy. I worried the entire time about what my parents would say when they got home to find the refrigerator empty, the pantry bare, and my friends passed out on the sofa after gorging themselves on our groceries like two Roman aristocrats at a feast.

My parents taught my brothers and me to be frugal and sensible. They admonished us not to be greedy or wasteful. They managed to keep three active boys fed and healthy while teaching us that there were limits to our cravings. We had what we needed and most of what we wanted. I do tell my children from time to time that we were limited to one soft drink a week when I was little—and that was a real treat!

Of course, our pantry was never bare and our refrigerator was never empty. In fact, we had two refrigerators, but that was because my father never liked to get rid of anything that still worked, a trait I have inherited. We never lacked for food, and I certainly never missed a meal. And there was never too little ham for sandwiches. We always had enough food to share, especially with friends. Nevertheless, in my mind, we were a one-slice-of-ham family.

Professor Walter Brueggemann talks about what he calls "the myth of scarcity." The myth of scarcity is essentially the belief that there is never enough of anything so we must grab what we can, hold onto what we have, and do so before our neighbor does.¹

Nutritionists trace our eating habits back thousands, perhaps millions, of years to when our ancestors were hunter-gatherers. Back then one lived with either feast or famine. When food was found, one ate all he could because he never knew when the next meal would be. People hunted, they gathered, they gorged. They lived in a reality of the scarcity of food and the necessity to get all you could when you could.

According to Dr. Brueggemann, however, the myth of scarcity is not a predisposition of our nature; rather, it was a lie introduced by Pharaoh. Pharaoh was the richest, most powerful man on earth at the time and, until that time, abundance was the prevailing understanding of life. The Hebrews learned that God created the world with an abundance of everything and gave it to humanity as a gift. Over and over, God took what appeared to be insufficient and made it abundant. He called Abram and Sarai to go into a new land and become a nation more numerous than the sands of the sea. He took barrenness and gave the gift of a son. He took adversity and turned it into success. He took disobedience and transformed it into faith. God abundantly provided for his people.

But the richest man on earth began having nightmares about famines. (Genesis 41) He used Joseph, one of the children of God's promise, to devise a system whereby he controlled all of the food in the land and used it as leverage to gain control of everything else—the money, the land, the livestock, and, eventually the Hebrews people themselves. That is how they became slaves.²

¹Walter Brueggemann, "The Liturgy of Abundance, the Myth of Scarcity," *The Christian Century* (March 24-31, 1999).

²Brueggemann.

My parents never taught me to believe in the myth of scarcity, but I learned it along with everyone else. In fact, our culture thrives on it. Advertisers are always teasing us with products we must have, with inventory that will soon disappear, and with sales that are in their final days or hours. In a country that has far more abundance than many other countries combined, we live in fear of not having what we need or, more accurately, what we want. And if we are not careful, we gradually begin to hold onto more than our food, our property, and our toys. We also want to hoard our space, our opportunities, and our view of how the world should be.

Jesus knew about this way of thinking. In fact, he grew up immersed in such a culture that was controlled by the Roman Emperor, Herod, and, of course, the Pharisees. So his reaction to this way of thinking and being shaped his message, undergirded his theology, and focused his ministry. We see it in his story of the Pharisee and tax collector. Listen:

He also told this parable to some who trusted in themselves that they were righteous and regarded others with contempt: "Two men went up to the temple to pray, one a Pharisee and the other a tax collector. The Pharisee, standing by himself, was praying thus, 'God, I thank you that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector. I fast twice a week; I give a tenth of all my income.' But the tax collector, standing far off, would not even look up to heaven, but was beating his breast and saying, 'God, be merciful to me, a sinner!' I tell you, this man went down to his home justified rather than the other; for all who exalt themselves will be humbled, but all who humble themselves will be exalted." Luke 18:9-14

Although there is no mention of food or money or anything else that you can put in your pocket, your cupboard, or your bank, this parable is a story about living with a sense of scarcity. Two men went into the temple to pray, to seek God, to find mercy because they did not think there was enough to go around.

The Pharisee was a one-slice-of-ham guy. Well, he was Jewish, so maybe we should change that to pastrami! Anyway, he did not think there was enough mercy to go around. "Thank you, God," he prayed, "that I am not like other people: thieves, rogues, adulterers, or even like this tax collector." He was under the impression that God's grace was limited, in short supply, and to be rationed.

The tax collector also believed the myth of scarcity and did not think there was enough grace to go around; thus, he felt he was completely undeserving of God's generosity. Neither of the men recognized the abundance of God's grace. Yet, God's pantry is never empty. God's fridge is always full. With God, there is always enough and more. On that day, the tax collector feasted on God's generous grace. The Pharisee, however, left the temple unsatisfied, still munching on his self-righteousness.

The psalmist understood God's economy. Hear again how he describes God's abundance:

Those who live at earth's farthest bounds
are awed by your signs;
you make the gateways of the morning
and the evening shout for joy.
You visit the earth and water it, you greatly enrich it;
the river of God is full of water;
you provide the people with grain, for so you have prepared it.
You water its furrows abundantly, settling its ridges,
softening it with showers, and blessing its growth.
You crown the year with your bounty;
your wagon tracks overflow with richness.
The pastures of the wilderness overflow,
the hills gird themselves with joy,
the meadows clothe themselves with flocks,
the valleys deck themselves with grain,
they shout and sing together for joy.

Psalm 65:8-13

Did you catch that? There is so much abundance with God that even the people who live at the margins of life experience God's generosity. The earth is fruitful, it flourishes with crops. In fact, God makes things to grow even in the ruts of the wagon tracks. Nothing can diminish God's bounty!

There is no scarcity with God and we do not have to live as if there is. We do not have to hoard. We do not have to live as if we will not have another day to enjoy life. We do not have to feel as if we must get what we want today before someone else gets it tomorrow. Sadly, the Pharisee did not get it and left the temple unsatisfied, starved for grace because he tried to garner it all for himself. The tax collector, however, expecting nothing and was surprised at the bounty of grace God offered to him.

Jesus and the prophets before him often spoke of God's community as a feast that all people will enjoy. Isaiah described it in this way:

On this mountain the Lord of hosts will make for all peoples a feast of rich food, a feast of well-aged wines, of rich food filled with marrow, of well-aged wines strained clear. And he will destroy on this mountain the shroud that is cast over all peoples, the sheet that is spread over all nations; he will swallow up death forever. Then the Lord God will wipe away the tears from all faces, and the disgrace of his people he will take away from all the earth, for the Lord has spoken.

It will be said on that day, Lo, this is our God; we have waited for him, so that he might save us. This is the Lord for whom we have waited; let us be glad and rejoice in his salvation.
Isaiah 25:6-9

There is often a shroud cast over our lives, a feeling that our survival is at risk, that it is every person for him or herself, that we are in a competition in which whoever is the last one standing is the winner. But God does not think that way. God does not act that way. God is always generous. God lavishes us with goodness. We think God's grace and goodness are limited; therefore, we do not recognize all that we have. We do not experience God's generosity; therefore, we are not always generous toward one another.

Recently, readers of *The Christian Century* magazine were invited to write essays on the topic of "feasts." Each of the stories recounted some experience of God's abundance that went far beyond any food that was shared. Cordelia Burpee's story is about someone who often lived in a famine of goodness, but who regularly feasted on the abundance God offers us all. Hear what she wrote:

Things were hectic as we got ready to open the church doors for the dinner crowd of homeless, hungry, marginally employed, and lonely people waiting outside. It was always a scramble to get enough help and get ready on time, and sometimes the meals seemed just barely pulled together. But tonight was a good night. As people filled their plates and found places to sit, I noticed a tall, thin young man who was sitting on the edge of the stage and watching everything with great interest.

I went over and introduced myself as I sat down next to him. “You new here? I don’t remember seeing you.” He introduced himself as Phillip and told me that he had tagged along with the Catholic church ladies who had come with dessert. “I wanted to see how things worked here and if there was anything that I could do to help.” He mentioned that he had just returned to town after a long absence and was still getting adjusted. He looked worn out but joked around and seemed happy to be with us. I invited him to come back anytime to help or just to eat.

He did return, and he became involved in planning the meals. He replaced the paper place mats and napkins with white tablecloths and linen napkins (which he washed and ironed each time). He set the tables carefully with fresh flowers that he’d convinced florists to donate. At the end of the meal the vases of flowers were offered to guests, so we scrounged more vases for the next meal. He greeted people at the door and escorted them to their table. To him they were honored guests and each meal was a celebration. He encouraged folks to share their stories. We celebrated birthdays and anniversaries and listened to updates on people’s health, housing, and employment struggles.

Eventually I heard Phillip’s story. He was HIV positive and had been struggling for ten years to manage a variety of symptoms. He returned home because his symptoms were worsening. He had hoped to reconnect with his family, but the parents who had kicked out their gay teenage son still wanted no part of him. He was devastated and casting around for connection to his hometown. He decided to help others feel the welcome he hadn’t received.

Phillip kept the meals going during holidays and bad weather, sometimes by himself, because he never wanted anyone to show up and discover a locked door. In the process he transformed those meals into a joyous celebration of our common connection. Each evening was full of laughter and joking as folks drifted from table to table to greet each other.

Phillip died a couple of years ago, but I think of him often. A mass written by Guillermo Cuéllar includes these words, “Let us go now to the banquet, to the feast of the universe. The table’s set and a place is waiting. Come everyone with your gifts to share.” I imagine being with

Phillip at that feast. He'll be the one greeting each of us with a smile and a bad joke and showing us to our seats.³

Clearly, Phillip was the tax collector who went to the temple hoping to pick up the crumbs of grace dropped by people like the Pharisee. Surprising to us all, in his own selflessness, he discovered the abundance of God's generosity that he could not find, even in his own family. By accepting God's graciousness toward himself, he was able to be gracious to others and lived a life that was full and complete, even in his death.

Whether we are talking about food or housing or jobs or healthcare or peace or respect or human dignity or education or housing or job opportunities or forgiveness or kindness or grace or even ham sandwiches, in God's world, there is no lack whatsoever because God provides all we need. God gives generously to us so that we can share generously with one another. Only when we believe the myth of scarcity and hoard God's goodness do we cause trouble for the world. It is often the people who have grown up with real scarcity who are the most generous. It is frequently the ones of us who have grown up with much who try to hold on to it all. We all know that it is Christ who gave everything, including his life, so that we might have life in abundance (John 10:10). What's on your sandwich? What's on your brother's? Your sister's? At God's table, the ham is piled high because there is always enough. May we all enjoy the feast! Amen.

³Cordelia Burpee, "Feast," *The Christian Century* (September 14, 2016): 22; available online at: <http://www.christiancentury.org/article/2016-08/feast>.

October 23, 2016

Prayer of Thanksgiving and Intercession

Gracious and Loving God, we come to you this morning with hearts of gratitude for the many blessing you have given, for the gift of a new day and for the beauty of all that your hands have created. Thank you for the mountains, seas, forests, and skies and for all the colors of creation. Thank you for all the beautiful and fragrant plants, and for the power and wonder of every animal. Thank you for the seasons and the rains that keep our earth renewed. Grant us, dear God, the grace to see your beauty and likeness in created things, and may we show great care to touch earth with gentleness and with love.

We also give thanks for the gift of music and for the privilege to use it to tell of your love for us and our love for one another. We thank you for the gift of our church and for the church in every land, for the light it gives in this community and throughout the world. Help us, O God, to walk in a manner worthy of the calling you have given us. Help us to have humble and gentle hearts. Grant us patience for one another, bearing with one another in love, and grant the body of Christ unity for all people everywhere.

We pray for our nation and for those in authority and leadership, both locally and throughout the world. Give them your mind and surround them with godly counselors who will exercise integrity and work for justice. Raise up leaders, Dear God, who will serve you faithfully at all costs. We lift up those in our neighborhood and our city. But begin with us, Dear Father, and help us to influence others for good. Help us to be salt and light, pointing others to you. Deepen our love for you and for the people around us. Turn hearts of fathers toward their children and families toward you. Help us to be bold in our faith, and may our love for you help us to love and forgive others and make a difference just where we are.

Lord Jesus, we thank you for the privilege of praying for others as so often we have been the recipient of others' prayers. You promised in your word to hear our prayers, so we pray with confidence. We seek you and the healing that only you can provide. We have mentioned those among us this morning and we pray for them in a particular way. Be near them, Dear Father, even now and meet their every need. Grant them healing of body, mind, and spirit and the comfort of knowing you hold all heaven and earth in your loving hands.

We pray for the lost, the hurting, the lonely, the bereaved and those who are imprisoned behind both visible and invisible walls. Send your comfort, your peace, and your calming presence to those who are without hope. Protect the defenseless and hold them close to your heart.

And just as sincerely as we have prayed for others, we pray for ourselves as we simply bow our heads to tell you the desires of our hearts. We often struggle, Precious Father, and we need your help. When we are confused, give us patience to sit quietly until one true thing emerges for us to do and then give us the courage to go do it. When there are things we need to get rid of, help us to let them go. When there is something we know we must do, help us to go do it. When we need the support of others, help us make our needs known so that we can give out of wholeness and not neediness. And above all, Dear God, grant us the certainty that there will be no stopping all the good we can do when we go in Jesus' precious name. Amen.

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