

From Scarcity to Abundance

Bob Setzer, Jr.
Pastor

Knollwood Baptist Church
Winston-Salem, North Carolina

www.knollwood.org

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Deuteronomy 8:11-18; Mark 8:14-21

The story of Jesus' disciples fretting about only having one loaf of bread right after Jesus fed two multitudes would be funny, if it were not so sad. And not because of what the story says about the *disciples*, but because of what the story says about *me*. How often have I, like them, been showered by God's mercies, only to have my fear overwhelm my faith at the first sign of trouble?

To recap, Jesus has just fed two huge multitudes from a meager batch of loaves and fishes. First he feeds 5,000 from five loaves and two fish, leaving 12 baskets of leftovers. Not long afterwards, he encounters another crowd of 4,000. Once more, Jesus' compassion moves him to action because these folks are hungry.

His disciples patiently explain, once again, why it is impossible to feed so many people with the meager rations they have on hand. But for the second time, Jesus overwhelms their skimpy, scarcity thinking with God's abundance. This time after everyone is fed and full, there are seven baskets of leftovers.

It would appear Jesus has emphatically made the point that God's bounty, present in him, is sufficient to meet every need. But not so fast.

For upon getting into their boat to cross the Sea of Galilee, the disciples discover they have only one loaf of bread between them. This leaves them sick with fear. Apparently, they forgot to lug any of those baskets of leftovers on board. And so Jesus' best and brightest followers start fretting about how they will row and sail across a large expanse of water, on so little food.

Their plight reminded me of a night in October when our KBC mission team was settling in for the night at the Amos compound in Nicaragua. As we gathered for our time of evening sharing (affectionately called, "Shall We Gather at the *Router*," instead of the *River*), we noticed the large bottle that supplied our drinking water was nearly empty. Since we couldn't drink the water from the spigots, and there was nothing else to drink in the guest house, we were facing a long, thirsty night.

Nicaragua is a place where one cannot take clean drinking water for granted. In Nejapa, where we were staying, water only runs through the pipes a couple of times a week, and then, only during the wee hours of the morning. As a result, one's water supply must be carefully gathered, hoarded, and even guarded. So when I realized that our water supply was nearly gone, a quiet panic slowly rose in my throat.

Fortunately, we were able to summon a security guard who came bearing a large bottle of fresh water on his shoulder. But I was surprised, as were others in our group, at how quickly we felt our vulnerability and need.

Similarly, Jesus' disciples lived in a place and time where one's next meal was not guaranteed. Jesus taught them to pray for *Daily Bread* for a reason. So the disciples' anxiety about having but one loaf is not as absurd as it seems.

Still, Mark intends to shock us with the contrast between Jesus feeding nearly 10,000 people on a dozen loaves of bread and the disciples fretting over having only a single loaf of

bread. Apparently, those closest to Jesus not only forgot to bring any leftovers for their voyage, they also forgot Jesus was on board!

Sooner or later, it happens to us all. We get a frightening medical diagnosis and the panic sets in. The light of optimism and hope dims before the gathering storm of catastrophic thinking. “Oh my God, how I am going to get through this? The sea is so large and my boat is so small!”

Or we get the dreaded news that we’ve been downsized or outsourced. The stability and income we counted on is suddenly gone. We feel vulnerable and exposed and in some ways, we are: “My God, why *now*, when all I have onboard to feed my family is a single loaf of bread!”

Or the tragedy and trauma of church shootings and other random acts of violence leave us running scared. Where can we hide? Where can we find safety and security? Is it time to arm ourselves to the teeth in an effort to protect ourselves?

And all the while, Jesus sits in the back of the boat, ignored and forgotten. Shaking his head, he muses aloud, “Hey! Do I get a say in this?”

No, the flight from resting in God’s abundance to fearful, scarcity thinking is not just the disciples’ problem. This is our problem too.

Recently, I was blessed to meet a young minister who is excited about beginning his ministry in the service of the church. He was a church musician, and I, along with couple of other KBC folk, were talking with him about our upcoming search for Ken Wilson’s successor. Talk about something that makes me anxious!

But during the course of that conversation, two truths kept ringing home, even in my oxygen-starved, fear-strapped brain. There is a whole new generation of young men and women who are competent, passionate, and eager to serve in and through and alongside the church. Two of whom helped lead our worship today: Corinne Causby and Josh Godwin. So the all-too-common, sky-is-falling reporting about the state of the church, is only *half* the truth. The

other half is that God is still God and that Jesus still lives. And for those who yet trust in our Lord's power to take our meager offerings and turn them into a feast, the future is bright.

In fact, as that young church musician and minister put it, "If you're despairing about the future of the church, then that says a lot about your view of God!"

And this was not Pollyanna optimism on his part. This young man knows, as I do, that the challenges the church faces in this post-Christian age are pressing and real. But these are challenges we can and will meet so long as we remember we are not taking this voyage alone. No, Jesus is sitting in the back of the boat, just waiting, aching for us to invite him into our dilemma. When we do, that is the cosmic shift that changes everything.

So what is the remedy Jesus offers the disciples and us? To open our eyes . . . and to remember: "Do you have eyes, and fail to see? Do you have ears, and fail to hear? And do you not remember?" Clearly, Jesus' aggravation is on the rise. He can hardly believe his hard-hearted, dim-witted disciples. Like a teacher, reviewing an exam the class flunked, Jesus asks, "When I broke the five loaves for the 5,000, how many baskets full of broken pieces did you collect?"

The disciples answer dully, "Uh . . . 12."

"Right!" says Jesus. "And when I broke the seven loaves and fed 4,000 people, how many basketfuls of leftovers were left?"

The disciples wrack their brains and a couple count on their fingers. "Seven!" cries the first to hit upon the answer, like a contestant banging the buzzer on a game show.

"Right again!" says Jesus. He pauses, letting the lesson sink in. Then he looks searchingly at his ragtag band and asks, "Do you not yet understand?"

Mark doesn't record the disciples' answer to Jesus' question, but we don't need the answer. We already know what it is because their answer is our answer: "No, Jesus, we don't yet understand or trust or believe in you enough to keep our worry and anxiety at bay."

Thus, we see Jesus trying to free his disciples from the chokehold of fear by summoning, not so much faith, but memories of faith. He challenges them to remember God's bounty in the feeding of the 5,000 and the feeding of the 4,000 because celebrating God's faithfulness in the past is a powerful antidote to fear about the future. That's why in the Bible, giving thanks is not about good manners, or the polite and proper thing to do. No, giving thanks is first and foremost, a spiritual survival strategy. Because in paying attention, becoming aware, and naming all the ways God has sustained and guided us in the past, our spirits are steadied and steeled for whatever challenges come next.

And so Moses enjoins the Hebrews poised to enter the Promised Land to remember how they got there. It was not due to their native wit, ingenuity, grit, or daring. No, it was because God, like a mother eagle with eaglets on her back, bore them out on mighty, beating wings.

"Do not exalt yourselves," Moses cries, "forgetting the one who brought you out of Egypt, out of slavery. . . . For it was the Lord your God who led you through that great and terrible land, made water flow from rocks, and fed you manna in the wilderness."

Some years ago, at a retreat center outside Atlanta, I spent two days in the company of some of the most skilled, dedicated pastors I'd ever met. For the most part, these were not young ministers, full of promise, like the one with whom I recently shared a cup of coffee at Krankies. No, these ministers were near mid-life or beyond, which meant they'd been kicked around enough by life--and in some cases, by the ministry itself--that they'd lost the cocksure confidence of youth. Indeed, many of them were whipped and exhausted and in desperate need of some spiritual R & R.

And yet, amid the weariness and desperation, there was another note that sounded again and again. And that was the confidence that through it all, God had been and would be faithful.

One Episcopal rector, a fifty-something woman who came to the ministry late, recalled being a college student and seeing a poster. The poster showed a vast, shimmering sea with a single, tiny boat bobbing on the surface. The caption read, “The water is so wide and my boat is so small.”

“For a long time,” this minister told us, “that’s the way I felt. Full of fear, I felt small and helpless.”

“But then as life unfolded, I discovered how God sustained me. God was not in the boat, protecting me from the elements. And God was not in the storms, trying to do me harm. No, God was the water, holding me up.”

If you are blessed to live long enough and to walk side-by-side with Jesus, in time you learn that God can be trusted. Because your accumulated experiences of God’s faithfulness start adding up to a trend, a trajectory, an expectation, a confidence, that in God’s good time, God will show up in some surprising way to meet your depletion with God’s abundance and your despair with a Spirit-breathed hope.

So the next time you find yourself fretting over having only one loaf of bread in the boat, maybe you’ll catch yourself, and answer that rising panic with memories of God’s faithfulness. And not only memories of God’s faithful to you but also to God’s people throughout history. Time and time again, what God’s people feared would be a famine, became in God’s hands, a feast.

Like this altar filled with food for members of our community facing food insecurity; Jesus, it seems, still multiplies the loaves and the fish. He takes your meager offerings and mine and turns them into God’s bounty so someone who is hurting and hungry doesn’t have to be so afraid anymore.

“Oh my God, there’s only one loaf in the boat!” we cry in desperation. “How can I face so great a storm, reversal, disappointment, or challenge? The water is so wide and my boat is so small!”

“It’ll be okay,” calls Jesus from the back of the boat. “For lo, I am with you always, even to the end, or what you thought was the end.”

For I am not the boat, protecting you from the elements. Nor am I the storm, threatening to capsize your tiny craft. No, I am the water, stretching in every direction, that is holding you up. Now and forevermore.

Lord Jesus Christ, may we take refuge in your promise, “Lo, I am with you always, even to the end of the world.” So when we fear the end may be drawing near, help us beat a path to you that in your bounty and faithfulness, we can find what we need. Amen.

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