

Thoughts On Abundance and Scarcity

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You may be wondering why, when I proposed our kick-off meal for the Stewardship Campaign, that I offered the serving of Cornish pasties. There are lots of traditional church dinners we at Trinity are familiar with. Indeed, there are a number of stereotypical church potluck dishes. But this isn't one you'd normally think of...unless you grew up in Michigan – particularly the Upper Peninsula – where the significant Cornish immigrant population brought the dish with them when they emigrated from the southwest of Britain around the turn of the 20th Century. My mother's family was one of those families.

While it is now a highly popular – one might say gourmet – dish in the United Kingdom, even receiving special European Union protected status – the dish's origins are very humble. In Cornwall, the pasty was a dish of the poor, the working class, miners, and farmers. Men, like my great-grandfather, would take the meat and vegetable pocket into the mine each day, wrapped in newspaper – the affordable and efficient wrapper of the time – and would reheat it on the back of a shovel, if necessary. The distinctive crimp on the pouch of this dish – often called the handle – is now decorative, but back then was used to hold the pasty and discarded, so that arsenic from mining wouldn't poison the men who consumed them.

The pasty is the perfect illustrator of the relationship between scarcity and abundance. The original dish – much as today – was made from affordable staples including potatoes, beef, onions, and swede (or what we call rutabaga). It was quick, and it was cheap. The perfect dish for the working class. But once you taste one of these things, you'll appreciate it for its abundance. It's filling – enough to feed a miner for the day – and supremely delicious. It's simple – yet an icon for a nationality.

After a summer of dieting, I must be crazy for picking a meat pie as a metaphor, but I have done stranger things. My goal today is to make the argument that, **even in the midst of what may seem like chronic scarcity, we are surrounded by abundance.** At a time of year where our church discourse turns to giving – the dance of these two terms is awfully appropriate. In the next few minutes I hope to talk about the relative nature of scarcity and abundance, how naturally and

appropriate some dis-ease over the kind of money matters raised in today's readings is, and some simple steps we can all take to address the sense of uncertainty.

Scarcity and Abundance

The story of Lazarus from our Gospel reading, much like the messages from our other readings, contrasts the status of the rich and poor and casts those of means in a less than favorable light. Yet one aspect of this story that might go overlooked is the significance of one phrase, that Lazarus "longed to satisfy his hunger with what fell from the rich man's table." It is interesting that what can satisfy us is truly a matter of perspective. For those who have much, we feel we need more to be fulfilled. For someone who is used to less, the threshold for satisfaction may well be less. We might call this the law of rising expectations.

This reality became abundantly clear to me during our recent "Fill the Ford" event. As Alec and I, and later others, began tallying the estimated value of various groceries, I found myself stymied about the prices of basic goods – cereal, beans, peanut butter, pasta. A few times I had to call or text folks to get price estimates. During one stop at HyVee I walked around with my cell phone snapping pictures of price tags. At one point I paused and thought: "When did this one-time impoverished PhD student become so comfortable that I no longer needed to pay attention to whether I was getting bargains at the grocery store?"

This realization bothered me, a lot. It troubled me even more, as I read and re-read the passages for today. I by no means consider myself rich, and like many people who work for Truman, I know I earn far less for what I do than the national average. And yet, since I completed graduate school, I've never really felt financially *insecure*. In the days since our food drive, I've felt a much greater sense of personal *abundance*, and I've also gained a new perspective on what it means for resources to be scarce. Our definitions of these terms are linked to our vantage point. And I don't think of abundance and scarcity exclusively as material things, but spiritual things as well.

Some Dis-ease is Natural and Appropriate

It is these challenging vantage points that make our annual conversation about stewardship a socially difficult one, and introduces a certain degree of dis-ease into our personal decisions about

giving. Being a little uncomfortable about these conversations is probably not only normal, and human, but a sign of our place in the order of things. For as Amos says, “Alas for those who are *at ease* in Zion, and for those who *feel secure* on Mt. Samaria.” Isn’t Amos really saying this sense of security is a *false* sense of security?

For those of us of more substantial means, it is hard to hear the words of today’s readings – particularly those words that suggest that, upon judgment, such people will find themselves brought low. One would think that knowledge of such leveling, or reversing of the status of rich and poor would make those of lesser means more content, but surely those who have trouble making ends’ meat may question that notion that “money is the root of all evil.” Money may seem like the ticket *out* of scarcity. Truthfully, I’m not sure anyone can come away from hearing these scriptures and feel entirely comfortable with what they say. They certainly don’t make it clear as to when one has crossed the line into the territory of becoming “rich” or “at ease,” and I suspect even the most well-off among us has a hard time calling themselves “rich.” I suspect that an even greater number of us, while maybe not calling ourselves poor, would argue that we don’t really feel we’re far enough ahead to feel “comfortable.” We certainly aren’t what the “Occupy Wall Street” movement called the “1%.” So how do we process this?

The discussions we have at this time of year ask us to really think critically about what is *important* in our lives – to take stock of those things we *need*, those things we can *do without*, and those things that deserve *greater investment* of our resources. I am comfortable standing before you today and saying that I have found this personal conversation challenging *every* year I’ve pledged. Each year I’ve said to myself, “*this doesn’t feel like enough*. I’m *not satisfied*.” And each year I’ve said to myself, “But when I do the math, I don’t feel like I can give more.”

But then, the Building Campaign came along, and I realized there was something I *really* felt I needed to do, and I made the math work. And there were other charitable projects I decided I wanted to contribute to – outside of Trinity – and I made *those* work, too. They felt *right*. Gradually, I began to realize more and more that abundance and scarcity are a matter of *perspective*, and I even if I was “less rich” in the sense of personal assets for my giving, I was “richer in other ways” for doing so.

Now, to be clear, I'm not claiming to be a great giver. Far from it. And we know the Bible doesn't look particularly kindly on flashy demonstrations of giving, just for demonstration's sake. I know I need to find new and creative ways to do what I feel *personally* I need to do. I strive to move closer and closer to the giving goals I've set for myself, and what I think God expects of me, and I have no problem admitting that I have a good ways to go before I get there. But someday, I hope to get there. I'm not ashamed of the fact that I'm not there. Rather, I rejoice in that fact that I am aware enough of the path that stands before me.

There Are Steps We Can Take

I wouldn't blame you if you sat here today and said, "This is all easy for him to say. He's a Truman faculty member. He's an administrator. He's single. He has no kids. This should be easy for him." Unfortunately, I have heard far too many conversations in the churches I've attended over the years that go something like, "Well, so and so has a good paying job, surely they have enough income that they can cover our shortfalls." I only wish I were of such means. But I don't think these scriptures tell us as much about our *fair share* – though the Biblical standard of the tithe is out there – so much as they tell us that we should experience some dis-ease about what we give. *We should* HAVE to think about it – and think *hard* about it. It should be important enough to us that it actually pinches a little. If it doesn't, it's not really a sacrifice. It's not really an offering. If we think building an accessible church is important, or having a full time Vicar is valuable, or keeping the organ maintained and the choir performing is critical to our identity, then we each need to make meaningful choices – each according to our means. For some of us, our most meaningful gifts may still be non-monetary, and that's worthwhile, too. But we live in a world that requires money to pay bills, and that reality isn't going away any time soon.

For me, one of the first and simplest things I knew I could do was to look for things that felt like necessities that weren't. Do I really need that online subscription to the service I hardly ever use? Do I really need that extra programming package on my satellite service when I'm hardly ever at home to watch it? Does the cat really need the high-end brand of kitty liter, or will the slightly dustier with the added infusion of baking soda cover the nastiness just as well?

This goes back to the issue I raised when talking about pricing during Fill the Ford. If each of us simply started using a few more coupons, or bought a few more generic products instead of name brands – or, dare I say, gave up one cup of coffee a day – and added that to our giving, how quickly might we make up our budgetary shortfall ... or accomplish even more? If we made a point of tossing our loose change at the end of the day into a jar marked “pledge” and tacked that on each month, how much more would we have?

And it may not be that these amounts are monumental increases. For some of us it might only be a couple more dollars a month. But collectively, it can amount to a great deal. And these changes don’t “really” even begin to pinch. Imagine what we can do if we make the even harder choices.

Our stewardship campaign this year will introduce a couple of new features. First, we are organizing – in addition to today’s lunch – three special social events. These events aren’t designed to apply pressure. There will be no sale on giving – no contracts to sign. These are meant to be social occasions where participants can talk about the future of Trinity, dream about what could be, and share their thoughts – or simply contemplate for themselves – where they see themselves in that future. We hope they will represent the first of many home social occasions – ones not necessarily tied at all to giving, but just ones that bring us closer together.

Second, on the last day of the campaign, during the Bishop’s visit, we will be asking folks to come forward and place their pledge cards in the plate. This won’t be done as the plates circulate, but will involve a symbolic walking forward – an in-gathering if you will. The card can still say whatever the donor wishes to put on it. The Bishop won’t see it, and your peers won’t see it. It is a statement between you, and God, and ... well...the Treasurer. But it is a symbolic action that we hope you’ll take pride and joy in. You may find in this action that moment of dis-ease, that moment where a sense of scarcity begins to tangle with a sense of abundance. But recall the words of Paul who wrote to Timothy: “As for those who in the present age are rich, command them not to be haughty, or to set their hopes on the uncertainty of riches, but rather on God who richly provides us with everything for our enjoyment. They are to do good, to be rich in good works, generous, and ready to

share, thus storing up for themselves the treasure of a good foundation for the future, so that they may take hold of the life that really is life.”

Amen