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St. Wilfrid's Church

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Have you ever been anxious about not getting enough...about not getting your fair share, even if later, your anxiety turned out to be unfounded? Every time I go back to Northwest Arkansas to visit family, my sister, Suzi-- -bless her heart---always invites all the family and extended family (about 20 people) over for dinner. And somehow, she always manages to convince her husband, Ron, to barbecue some ribs.

Now, what you need to understand is that Ron has become pretty much the best barbecue cook east of the Rockies, especially when he slow cooks ribs over wood smoke for several hours. My sister always sees to it that there are plenty of appetizers, that the wine flows freely, that the meal is filled out with all the "fixin's" as they say back there. But the truth everyone knows is: WE'RE ALL REALLY THERE FOR THE RIBS.

And just before grace is said, the anticipation---actually anxiety---is almost palpable. Everyone standing around that table, their mouths watering in anticipation and competition, is thinking the same thing: "Will I get enough of these ribs to satisfy my taste for these things??" Which is so silly, because there is always enough...there is always more than enough...in fact, there are always leftovers, just as there were when Jesus fed the multitudes.

We're all familiar with the story of the feeding of the 5000, or multiplication of loaves, as it is sometimes called, must have been very important to those early followers of Jesus, because it appears a total of six times in the four gospels. One commentary I read in preparation for this sermon, said, "In the feeding of the hungry crowd, Jesus reminds us that the wounds of scarcity can be healed only by faith in God's promise of abundance."

"Wounds of scarcity" ...is a poignant way to put it. My grandmother, who raised children during the Great Depression, would wrap Christmas presents in newspaper and paper sacks---this was years before that was fashionable---because she learned not to ever throw anything away. Scarcity and abundance may be for us relative terms, depending on our perspective, but not for God. The Bible is all about abundance.

From the first chapters of Genesis, God initiates abundance, calling forth plants and fish and birds and animals and "every living thing", and

pronounces at the end of the sixth day, before God rests from his labors, that it is all “very good. God has made the world and everything that is in it so that there will be enough, and God entrusts humankind, in the center of it all, to be stewards of all this abundance. The message is clear: God loves us and wants the best for us, and invites us to be agents of blessing in the world. Here’s another way to put it: Abundance is God’s job description. Distribution is our job description.

Of course, things don’t turn out quite that way. Dissatisfied with what they’ve been given, God’s creatures want more. Instead they get less. The Hebrew Scriptures tell stories of famines, betrayals, murders, intrigues, invasions and wars. The central story in the Old Testament, of course, is the Hebrew people being enslaved in Egypt under a brutal regime, being promised by God that they will be saved from this and shown a land of great abundance, a land of “milk and honey”. When finally, they are miraculously delivered by God out of their bondage, it is into the desert---a place everybody knows is a place of scarcity.

That’s when the story really starts to get good. Just when their notions of scarcity are about to overtake them, God feeds them. God sends something called manna; a sticky, flaky substance, like “hoarfrost”, whatever that is. Manna, translated literally, means, “What’s that?” Because whatever it is, it is not what food looks like to them. But it keeps them alive; it sustains them; and of course, it appears *somehow, out of the blue, at the last possible moment*. And we know what that means. God has a way of making things appear *somehow...out of the blue...*

So much of Jesus’ ministry seems to be about reminding people of God’s abundance. Jesus is filled with God’s generosity. Over and over, Jesus’ actions reflect those simple notions in the first two chapters of the Book of Genesis: *God loves us and wants the best for us and invites us to be agents of God’s blessing in the world.*

Jesus goes around to people suffering from scarcity...scarcity of health...scarcity of acceptance...scarcity of power... scarcity of understanding... scarcity of love...scarcity of food...and he replaces their scarcity with abundance.

Did you notice how, in the gospel reading this morning that it is Jesus asking Phillip, “How are we to buy bread for all these people to eat?” And then it

says, “This he said to test him, for he himself knew what he would do.” To test him... a little quiz, because by now, Jesus has already saved the day at a wedding party, by turning gallons of water into gallons of wine; he’s healed several folks (some of them not Jews---demonstrating rather loudly that God’s blessing is not confined just to one group of people; he’s offered salvation to a Samaritan woman---another non-Jew. Everywhere he goes, everything he does, it’s abundance, abundance, abundance.

And Phillip, representing the other disciples and probably most of us, demonstrates that he is slow to get the picture, “We couldn’t possibly scrape together enough money to buy bread for all these people.” It’s the voice of pragmatism, of efficiency, of the “real world”. It won’t work, Phillip says... No way... Get real. Not words of abundance, but words based on a reasonable analysis of the situation. The disciples see scarcity where Jesus sees abundance.

Well, we know how the story comes out: There is enough, there is more than enough. With God, there is always more than enough, because God is in the generosity business.

The eleven of us who recently visited Tanzania and laid the groundwork for what we hope will be a several-year long relationship, had the privilege, more than once, of experiencing abundance in situations where we would have pronounced scarcity. I’m going to ask Derek Wimmer (7:30 and 8:45) and Christian Kassoff (11:00) to come up now and share with you his experience.

Derek Wimmer – 8:45

On the Tanzania Safari, we experienced an overwhelming array of emotions. We felt heartbreak, great sorrow, an overwhelming sense of our inadequacy to address the challenges we met and yes, even anger at some of the things we heard. We also experienced the Holy Spirit moving in that place. We met incredible people that have given their lives to God’s work there - people who are true examples of God lifting up people to do his work. I could go on and on.

But this morning I want to focus for a few minutes on the incredible hospitality, generosity and warmth of the people that we met – people that have virtually nothing, barely even a subsistence living. As I’m sure many

of you know already, we came to a country where many areas had not seen rain for five years. People are starving, animals are dying and children are malnourished. Many women walk from four to eight hours every day just to get a bucket of water that they carry home for basic cooking needs and perhaps a little for their families to drink.

Let me tell you about a family that we were all privileged to meet. Toledo and Melegi are Masai brothers that Cheryl Kyle has known for many years and whom she has helped with education and in many other ways. Their family compound or Boma in Swahili, is about 20 miles outside Arusha in an incredibly remote, dusty and desolate place. It has no water and virtually no way to get any there except by 4 wheel drive truck which is prohibitively expensive – impossible without outside help.

We were met by the entire village and warmly welcomed. We were invited to come in to their huts and we saw how desperate their lives are. We saw painfully thin people, animals that seemed to be no more than bags of protruding ribs and children with distended bellies - the telltale sign of severe malnutrition.

And we sat with them and communicated as best we could. And we gave gifts from St. Wilfrid's that many of you contributed. And then in what we came to experience many times, we were invited to eat with them. First they came with a large teapot of hot water so that we could wash our dusty hands – water so precious to them - water they needed for drinking. And then they served the food. They had slaughtered a goat for us. A goat that was one or the few livestock left. And they did so with a warmth and grace that was overwhelming. Whereas we gave to them from our abundance they truly gave to us from their basic subsistence. And we were all humbled and blessed by them.

Later, we spent 3 days at a bible school that a year ago had a hundred students but now has only twenty five. Why you may ask? Well most of the young men had to return to their villages to hunt for animals so that their families would not starve. Many of the young women had to leave because unless they had scholarships, there simply was no money available for board and tuition. But those that were there had such joy in their hearts and in their worship and their singing. The Holy Spirit shone through them. We were all inspired.

And that leads me to tell you about a young woman, 20 years old whose name is Kulwa. I met her entirely by chance as I sat with her to help her with her computer skills and her English. I probably spent no more than a couple of hours with her on our first day there. Now Kulwa earns her keep by doing laundry and cleaning the guest house and the school. She is hundreds of kilometers from home. The day after we had worked together, she came looking for me and asked if she could have my address as she wanted to write to me. I said of course and encouraged her to do so. About an hour later she found me again and gave me a well worn photograph of her with her twin sister that she had not seen for nearly a year. It was the only personal thing she had from home and she insisted on giving it to me. I was probably more touched at that moment than I have been in many years. Talk about giving from the heart! Talk about sacrifice!

And these are just two of many examples of hospitality and kindness and incredible generosity that we received throughout the mission – things we will never forget and examples to us all.

Christian Kassoff – 11:00

First I'm going to try to tell you what my heart has to say about the trip and then if I get to it, what my mind has to say about it. Our teams real introduction to Tanzania and the people of Tanzania came at the middle of our second day there. We met a few Masai men at Christ's Church in Arusha which is in the city. On that day two of the men drove with us back to their village and we were introduced and welcomed at their Boma. When we left with them in our car at the tarmac, which is what they call the paved road over there (and there's not many of them) our driver, Amani, turned to us and said: "Welcome to Africa, the real Africa."

It was not what you see on TV or maybe you do sometimes. As we went through the rural areas of Arusha we saw extreme poverty. When we got to their Boma (it was a dry and dusty place, not a lot of cows) it was sad, it was heartbreaking, there wasn't a lot there. But we were welcomed with smiling faces and true love and joy. It was amazing; there was such scarcity there, but we definitely felt an abundance of spirituality. They knew we were coming (we weren't a surprise) they had slaughtered a goat for us to eat. I almost felt bad taking part in eating it but would have felt worse had I not joined in. They offered us water to wash our hands with. Water being a scarce resource, especially at this time during the drought, and again I felt

bad, washing my hands in their water. They had gifts for us and the love and the welcoming were felt deeply there. That was on our second day and we experienced more and more of that throughout our trip. I'm sure each of the team members felt it. If not immediately on that second day it definitely eased in over the next few because there was more and more experiences like that.

The people there are so rich in faith and love and the abundance of that in the midst of their scarcity of resources is just amazing! Wherever we went the Tanzanian people showed us genuine hospitality, warmth and generosity. We were welcomed everywhere and invited to join them in their churches and in their homes. Their generosity is all the more impressive when viewed in the light of their poverty. They appear to be among the poorest people on the face of the earth, yet our Tanzanian friends are lively and enjoy life. They showed us that wealth and possessions are not necessary to ensure happiness. Indeed it seemed as though they really enjoyed what they have because they have so little. In visiting several churches in the Diocese of Mt. Kilimanjaro it became clear to us that faith and love are the cornerstones of the Tanzanian church. The love of Christ was extended to all of us and it was shown by open greetings, not reserved attitudes or mere tolerance. It was shown by the smiles and the handshakes and the words spoken earnestly. It was shown by the fond farewells as we parted. It was shown by the acceptance of strangers as brothers and sisters. It is this love that will connect us for the rest of our lives.

Fr. Harold, continuing....

I need to say a word about this Ephesians passage we heard this morning because each evening, as we got together as a group and reflected about our experiences, we were using the Letter to the Ephesians to guide us. Not only that, one of the passages I was asked to preach on in Tanzania was from the third chapter of---you guessed it---Ephesians. We were looking at Ephesians; we talked about this very passage. So when we got to this line that we hear this morning, "For we are God's workmanship, created in Christ Jesus for good works, which God prepared beforehand, that we should walk in them..." we all said, "Well, yeah!" Of course, we were created for good works, for service, for going out and partnering with God in

sharing the abundance. Because there is so much abundance we have to share and the needs are so great. It was our joy, at the end of our trip, to spend time together, praying and deciding how we were going to distribute the \$5000 (approximately) we had to give in support of various ministries we had seen.

Remember Mable? Remember how I shared with you two weeks ago, that I did not get to go and see this child in Uganda, whom I have sponsored for four years, because of political turmoil in Uganda. What I didn't tell you is that I was going to give her a whole bunch of new clothes, purchased here, and I carried over there, with her in mind. Well, the woman who runs the guesthouse for the Anglican Church in Arusha also has a little girl Mable's age. So I asked her, could her little girl wear these clothes? I don't have words to describe the look on her face when I showed her those clothes. You would have thought I had given her the sun, the moon and the stars. She even brought her little girl by the next day, wearing one of the dresses. Not only do I not have words to describe for you her joy...I don't have the words to describe my joy either ...the fact that I had found someone to whom to give this gift...someone who would receive it and benefit from it. It was a rich experience.

You know, if we spend any time at all, watching TV reading the newspaper, looking through magazines, online, or just driving around looking at billboards...we are constantly assaulted with the message that whatever we have is not enough... that we need more, that there is something else that we don't yet possess, that if we did possess it, would make our lives better.

It all plays into our notions of scarcity. We all go there from time to time. "Will I have enough in my old age?" I sometimes wonder. "Will our children have enough? ...What if someone gets really sick?"

These are not bad questions. These are not unimportant questions. But they are questions that need to be kept in perspective. As Fr. Lee reminded us last Sunday, we all have a journal; it's called our checkbook. It is a revealing spiritual exercise to look at that checkbook and see how we spend the money we've been given.

If we are constantly comparing ourselves to the richest of the rich, or even those who have a little more than we do, we will probably be driven by a sense of scarcity. If, on the other hand, we keep in mind that God is in the

generosity business, the abundance business, and invites us to be agents with Him in blessing, that's a whole different deal.

There is a wonderful Thanksgiving Day hymn that is a little hard to sing but the refrain is memorable:

*“All good gifts around us are sent from heaven above,
then thank the Lord, then thank the Lord, for all his love.”*

You and I have been created in Christ Jesus for good works, and when people like us, who like to call ourselves the “people of God”, trust God's dreams enough to realign our dreams with God's dreams, miraculous things do happen.

I love you. Be happy. Amen

I am grateful to Dr. Walter Brugemann for his perspectives on the story of the Feeding of the Multitudes in his article, "Enough is Enough".