

**Sermon Preached July 26, 2015
Year B, Proper 12
St. John's Episcopal Church
Beverly Farms, Massachusetts
The Rev. Stephanie Chase Bradbury**

Let the words of my mouth and the meditation of our hearts be acceptable in your sight,
Oh Lord, our strength and our redeemer. Amen.

St. John's takes great joy in running a portion of the B-Safe program every year, a summer enrichment program for inner city kids from Chelsea. This past Friday was one of their field trip days hosted by our parishioner Joanne Patton at her Green Meadow Farm. The kids spent the day picking blueberries and green beans, feeding the pigs, going on hay rides, watching the chickens, discussing vegetables, and learning about food production. They reveled in the fields and animals and running around. At one point Joanne was in her golf cart, which she uses to get around the large property, when a young boy, intrigued with the cart, climbs up on the seat next to her. He looks up at Joanne and with great delight exclaims, "I LOVE your Mini-Cooper!"

Today's gospel lesson has Jesus also interested in food production, although this story begins with fear and scarcity.

The feeding of the multitudes is the only miracle story in the New Testament that is found in all four gospels, so we know there is something particularly important that is trying to be conveyed. Jesus and his disciples are up on a mountain when a huge number of people follow him. He asks a rhetorical question about how they are going to feed these people, and the disciples respond with doubt that it is possible. Phillip says six months wages couldn't feed them

all. Then a young boy offers five loaves of bread and two fish. Andrew thinks it is insufficient. But then Jesus performs a miracle over that small offering and it is found that there is more than enough food for everyone, with twelve baskets left over. Rather than the scarcity which the disciples feared, Jesus provides an abundance.

Another miracle story happens later when the disciples are again afraid. They are out in a boat at night, several miles offshore, when a storm comes up and tosses the boat around. Jesus appears to them, walking on top of the water, and they are terrified. He says to disciples, “do not be afraid,” which seems to calm them, because they immediately try to bring him into the boat.

Both of these stories contrast fear and assumptions of scarcity with the peace and abundance that is offered in the person of Jesus Christ.

Fear and scarcity are often our default settings. We can imagine all the things that can possibly go wrong. We can convince ourselves that there won't be enough. Economics and marketing contribute to this perception. We are awash in images and advertisements that seek to convince us that we are lacking something. We swim in an ocean of perceived scarcity. Bad things will happen to us if we don't buy this pair of designer shoes, this car, or this mouthwash. Fear compels us to purchase perceived happiness. Not being able to buy it all convinces us that there is a scarcity.

“In an influential 1932 essay, Lionel Robbins defined economics itself as ‘the science which studies human behavior as a relationship between ends and scarce means which have

alternative uses.”¹ When there is a belief in scarcity, competition arises with the resulting winners and losers. The “nature of desire leads us to desire the same objects -- which therefore seem scarce, even when they are not. When two children fight over the same teddy bear in the nursery, that bear seems scarce even if there are a dozen others just like it. [We can find ourselves worshipping] gods who rule over scarcity, doling out who gets the blessings and who gets cursed. Jesus invites us to know another God, the God who gives life abundantly”² to everyone.

The book Scarcity: Why Having Too Little Means So Much, by a Harvard economist and a Princeton psychologist posits that when we feel that there is a scarcity, whether it be of money, food, time, or friends, we obsess about it. So much so that we lower our ability to solve the problem and often work against our own interests. “This scarcity mindset can ... be debilitating. It shortens a person’s horizons and narrows his perspective, creating a dangerous tunnel vision. Anxiety also saps brainpower and willpower, reducing mental “bandwidth”, as the authors call it. Indian sugarcane farmers score worse on intelligence tests before the harvest (when they are short of cash) than after. Feeling poor lowers a person’s IQ by as much as a night without sleep.”³ The results often are that a person cannot then make good choices for getting out of the scarcity trap. In other words, even if you are not suffering from a scarcity, but you feel that you are, you obsess about it, and the results are the same. Our society encourages feelings of scarcity, not just money, but of time, and more. Our economic system would not work without it. I’m am not knocking capitalism, but simply pointing out one of its consequences. And this isn’t meant to

¹ <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Scarcity>, 7/25/15

² http://girardianlectionary.net/year_b/proper12b.htm, 7/25/15

³ <http://www.economist.com/news/books-and-arts/21584303-those-too-little-have-lot-their-mind-days-late-dollars-short>, 7/25/15.

ignore the fact that there are real scarcities in the world, but rather that for those who do have enough, chronically living with a perception of fear and scarcity is a stumbling block to imagining a different kind of world. A world of abundance. A world of win/win. A world without fear. A world where there is generosity of spirit between all, rather than competition, resulting in scarcity for none. The kind of world that Jesus offers and helps us create.

There is a reason that as Jesus walks towards the disciples in the boat he comforts them with the words, “do not be afraid.” We all live in so much fear! The disciples are convinced there is not enough food. They are convinced they will die in the storm. Living in fear causes us to circle the wagons and hoard. It causes tunnel vision and an inability to see the possibilities, the larger vision. Scarcity and fear cramps our vision. Trust in abundance opens us up. Jesus is trying to shake us loose!

20th century Baptist pastor and preacher Harry Emerson Fosdick wrote, “The common impression,” he said, “is that it is the unintelligent who believe in miracles, but the fact is that it is the great minds who believe most fervently in unforeseen possibilities.” What possibilities does Jesus open for us? In the reading from Ephesians, the Apostle Paul writes, “Now to him who by the power at work within us is able to accomplish abundantly far more than all we can ask or imagine.” God in Christ offers abundance, openness, and possibilities.

Perhaps abundance does not have to do as much with what we have, or with the world around us. It is not external. Perhaps it’s the perspective that comes when you know that God is present your life. Believing in a world of abundance, trusting that God will provide, maybe not

every wish you have, but every need you have, releases us. It opens us up, allowing us to see and receive the grace that is pouring down on us. Allowing us to be as delighted with a golf cart as with a Mini-Cooper. Allowing us to share what we have with others, without fear that we won't have enough. So that actual scarcity is abolished as thoroughly as perceived scarcity. While Jesus provides physically for the multitudes and the disciples, he is seeking an inner transformation of heart. In our reading from Ephesians Paul writes a hope, "that you may be strengthened in your inner being with power through his Spirit." As we move away from fear and scarcity, our inner being is transformed.

I will close with a story that illustrates what it means not to fear or live in scarcity, but rather to trust in God's abundance, allowing us to share with each other, so that all have enough.

It is the "story of a [seminary] student ... that went jogging with his father in their urban neighborhood. As they ran, the son shared what he was learning in seminary about urban ministry, and the father, an inner city pastor, related experiences of his own. At the halfway point in their jog, they decided to phone ahead for a pizza to be delivered to their home when they got there [this was before the days of cell phones]. As they headed for the phone booth, though, a homeless man approached them, asking for spare change. So the father reached into the pockets of his sweat pants and pulled out two handfuls of coins, "Here," he said to the homeless man. "Take what you need." The homeless man, hardly believing his good fortune, said, "I'll take it all," scooped the coins into his own hands, and went on his way.

Well, it only took a second for the father to realize that he now had no change for the phone. “Pardon me,” he beckoned to the homeless man. “I need to make a call. Can you spare some change?” The homeless man turned and held out the two handfuls of coins. “Here,” he said. “Take what you need.”⁴

Amen.

⁴ (Thomas Long, “Surprise Party”, available at <http://www.religion-online.org/showarticle.asp?title=2168>, accessed 21 July, 2009.), 7/25/15