

Sunday November 7, 2021
 Lesson 9: Shared Abundance
 Scripture: John 6: 1-15

Context:

The 2021 fall series is titled “Belong.” Each unit will focus on a way the people of God are called to seek community and discover how God has connected us to one another. Today we start a new unit titled “The Fellowship of the Table,” an exploration of the early church and how the table of God invited them to a new life with God and one another. This lesson “Shared Abundance” explores how God’s abundance alters our beliefs and actions as disciples of Christ.

The lesson comes from the book of John, the fourth gospel in the New Testament. The gospel of John provides many accounts of Jesus stating his identity and his mission as the “bread of life” given to the world. This declaration of identity is connected to his ability to perform miracles and show the people the abundance of God’s grace in front of them. The setting of the text is at the Sea of Galilee (sometimes referred to as the Tiberias Sea, the Roman name), as Jesus is traveling from village to village. The time is near the Passover, giving us a potential allusion to a new practice to be instituted by Jesus.¹ As the disciples will discover, Jesus will have a new tradition centered upon him for them to remember and participate in as they go forward.

Jesus invites his disciples, particularly Philip, to assist him in preparing the crowd who have gathered to see him perform a miracle. He even prods Philip, a test of sorts in addition to a claim of Jesus’ superior knowledge and power of decision.² The details of the event are very similar to those of the accounts of food multiplication in the gospel of Mark. Yet, there are distinct differences including the language with the three verbs “take,” “give thanks,” and “distribute,” which also appear in the words of the last supper.³ John is making a connection between Jesus at the beginning of ministry and one of the active last events where he will give the disciples a new commandment.

The scene is reminiscent of the last supper as Jesus does not just multiply the food; he blesses it by giving thanks and then distributing. He does the same with the fish. Then, he asks the disciples to collect what is left over from the crowd.

The response is the people seeing this as a genuine sign of “the prophet” they’ve been awaiting. Jesus leaves though as the kingship they have in mind for him is not the one he comes to bring. Kingship for the crowd is a national liberation at the hands of a powerful messiah-figure.⁴ Jesus is on the go, showing more is to come.

¹ Sloyan, Gerard. “John,” *Interpretation: A Bible Commentary for Teaching and Preaching* (Louisville, KY: John Knox Press, 2009), 64.

² Ibid, 64.

³ Ibid.

⁴ Ibid, 65.

Application

The account of Jesus and the crowd by the lake can be found in each gospel, directing us to the importance of the event. While some stories are independent encounters giving us glimpses of what the gospel writers valued, this one demonstrates a shared focus for all the gospels. Jesus is sharing life abundantly in the giving, blessing, and distributing of food. Jesus is not just performing a miracle for the crowd to swell. Jesus is showing his disciples, and the church today, how life is to be shared and lived with one another.

What is interesting in this passage for us is how Jesus interacts with the disciples. He includes them in the process and has them engage with him on conversations of abundance as well as having them collect the remains to make a point. They are part of his mission and he will then later unpack how he is the bread of life with them at the end of his earthly mission at the last supper.

Often, I think of how Jesus does the same with us. Time and time again, we look around and talk about what we do not possess. We do not have the people. We do not have the money. We do not have the space. We do not have the time. We play what is called the scarcity game. In this game, we make excuses for what we cannot do because of what we think we do not possess.

Through the years, I have noticed a shift in many spiritual leaders and writers exploring how we are to view abundance and scarcity. Often, we can be realistic about what we do not possess. Sometimes, the details are there to prove as much like on an excel spreadsheet listing certain numbers or demographics. You cannot pull money, space, resources, or people out of thin air.

Yet in abundance thinking, we begin to see how the things we do not possess, or think we do not possess, does not mean we are without or as destitute as we might believe. Instead, we are called to see how we do have things in front of us which are assets needed to be used imaginatively. Every place and every church has assets and abundance in front of them, even if you have to think differently about how you count or measure things.

Throughout his ministry, Jesus proved to the people there was abundance in front of them. Even though most of the people Jesus served and invited to follow him were poor and ordinary, Jesus wanted them to see how they had been gifted by God in other ways. They were called to believe in him and as they did, they would see the abundance of God in front of them in new ways.

In a church stricken by Covid-19 and a rapidly changing world, we find ourselves in a place where scarcity thinking flows freely through our spaces. The temptation is twofold: to give up or to try to go back to the way we've always done things no matter the cost. Neither option though focuses us on what is in front of us.

Abundance thinking can come in all sorts of ways for the church today whether it's people, resources, or ideas for ministry. What if God does not want us to go after the weak links, those who leave churches at the drop of a hat trying to hold on or appease them to come back? What if God wants us to focus on those who are loyal and are there to be nurtured and deployed. Find out why people come and make small groups out of those there discovering what they want to learn and then leading them to own their faith.

With resources, maybe it is time for budgets to be cut or reassessed. Maybe

instead of propping up dying ministries, we cut the cost and dream up something new. We focus on what we have instead and see how it can bloom and grow.

And with ministry, we keep trying new things. If something fails, assess what you learned and then try something else. Don't cling to something which doesn't work and don't just do something because that's what always has been done. See what new ideas God might be calling you to do and pursue those with gusto.

All of this focuses on the people of God seeing the abundance in front of them. God wants us to think of life as a gift to be shared with more resources than hindrances. God wants us to see how we have been called to share what we have been given and see how God will multiply it for the goodness of the kingdom.

How have you seen a mentality of scarcity hold churches or individuals back? How can a mentality of abundance transform us as disciples of Christ? Why do you think Christ performed this miracle in front of his disciples and the crowd? What are ways you can adopt abundance thinking to your personal walk with Christ? If you are a leader in the church, how can you lead your church to see abundance instead of scarcity?

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