

Sermon – Ninth Sunday after Pentecost

John 6: 1-21 & Ephesians 3: 14-21

I made mention in the newsletter this week of the three billionaires who have developed space exploration companies out of the wealth generated by their underlying business interests. Elon Musk, the entrepreneur behind Tesla Motors has SpaceX, Richard Branson, the entrepreneur behind the Virgin Group of companies has Virgin Galactic and Jeff Bezos, the driving force behind Amazon has his Blue Origin space company.

All these men are brilliant entrepreneurs, visionaries who created new products and ways of doing business that rightly places them in the top echelons of business. They deserve the wealth they have generated. Of course these are just three of the hundreds of billionaires in this country, a group of the 0.01% who have greatly expanded their wealth during the pandemic.

This country was built on the entrepreneurial spirit that is inherent in these men. We might say the two that are American are the American success story. Their abundance of wealth that they have generated trickles down in various forms to all of us really. Our 401k retirement funds probably have an investment in one or more of their companies. If not in these billionaires' companies then others.

We can argue all sides of the way wealth generation in this country works, the taxes paid or avoided, and the way these billionaires share their wealth. What we might all agree though is that these people are visionaries, people who see opportunities in the future that most of us miss. They strive for years to get traction for their ideas before hopefully attracting financial support. They have changed the world. So we have to admire them for their vision for space and for all the investment that is going into space travel.

What is hard to reconcile is the greater need for their visionary minds and financial resources to help solve the intractable problems in society of poverty, homelessness, injustice and our climate challenges. These challenges that we face as a society have all been created by humans for the earth that was created for us to live on was perfect in its balance and existence before our ancestors came along.

The God we credit with forming the earth, however physically that came about, created a planet that contained within it all the necessary ingredients for humans to flourish. Water was abundant, the soils were rich, the air was clean and the resources of the earth provided for developing shelters and ultimately cities. There was an abundance of resources for everyone to use.

However, civilizations soon started to hoard resources for trade and this led inevitably to scarcity of resources. The scarcer the resource the more highly it was valued. Soon the cycle of economic wealth came into being. This is now what shapes our lives. God provided abundantly

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for us but we have created scarcity because of our desire to hoard resources to increase our wealth, either collectively or individually.

We can see an illustration of abundance and scarcity play out in the gospel passage we heard from John this morning. The story is the well-known story of the feeding of the 5,000 or so souls who had gone out to hear Jesus and to be healed if possible. We all know this story well enough. The crowd comes to listen to Jesus. He announced to his disciples his concern that they needed to be fed. His disciples were perplexed because they knew in their hearts that they didn't have the resources to feed such large numbers. All they had was five loaves of bread and two fish.

Jesus of course knew how it was all going to play out but his disciples didn't. "Six months wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little," Philip says. After the crowd had been invited to sit they were fed. When the leftovers were collected they had way more than they started with, twelve baskets full. How did that happen?

Well this is what miracles are, the unexplained outcome, caused by God that confounds natural science. But let me give you an example of how I have witnessed something I found to be similar. Something I still marvel at to this day. At my church in Sydney we had an outreach café that served 80-100 hot meals every night. I volunteered there for three years one night a week. The food was donated from the Hare Krishna restaurant next door. Each night at around 10pm we would walk over and gather up the leftovers and take them back to the café, which was called *Rough Edges*.

The volunteers would set up the trays of food and the guests would line up. We served plate after plate of food never knowing how many people would actually come for a meal. But every night I was there serving meals we never once ran out of food. Every need for food was met. I still don't know how that happened, other than through the good providence of God who provided enough for the need we had.

Imagine if the world was able to provide what is needed for each one of us to have what we need to flourish. The world has the necessary resources to do this. The issue remains that most of these resources are somehow restricted so that they don't go to each one of us as we have need. They are hoarded for whatever reason. So scarcity exists in the world because we can't yet manage to balance the fair distribution of the abundance of the earth.

Famines exist because the necessary relief food is often hoarded by the elite of a country, fearful that they and their supporters might not have enough. Water shortages in California exist because in days past water was taken from the river systems for irrigation freely, water that was a public asset. However, irrigators were allowed to take water without regard for the downstream needs of communities, who have now mostly run out of water. COVID vaccines are another example.

There is no easy answer to the fair distribution of the earth's resources and products so that all people might flourish. Some people have incredible wealth, so much that they can build rockets to take a few people to space. But most don't have this wealth and billions of people everyday struggle to get by on meager rations of food and water.

Climate change is exacerbating these problems. Climate refugees and climate-based migration is only just starting to happen. If the world thinks the current flood of refugees is a concern we haven't seen anything yet. What will happen to people when food and water resources dry up and land is consumed with salination due to rising sea levels.

So what does Jesus teach us about responding to these needs. First, the stories of the feeding of the thousands reveals that the resources we need to meet the needs of the many are available if we faithfully work toward ensuring the resources God has provided us are fairly distributed as best we can.

This is why feeding programs of religious and non-profit organizations is critical to the future of the world. This is why we are building our Loaves and Fishes ministry here because the need for food in our community is real and we are able to meet some of that need in our own small way.

The second thing Jesus teaches us can be found in the letter to the Ephesians that is our epistle reading this week. What we heard this morning is a prayer that is offered by the writer to the community of faithful men and women in Ephesus. It is a prayer that can speak to us as well for the prayer contains the necessary ingredients for how we are to sustain ourselves in faith and respond to the needs of the world through our outreach work.

First, the writer prays that our inner beings might be strengthened through the power of the Holy Spirit working in us. Second, the writer prays that we might experience this as Jesus Christ in our hearts and that the experience of this will ground us in love for our work and worship. Thirdly, the writer prays that we might comprehend the vastness of God acting in the world, the breath and length and height and depth of Christ's love even as this vastness is often beyond our current understanding.

Finally, and for me most importantly, the writer prays that the power of the love of Christ working in us "is able to accomplish abundantly far more than we can ask or imagine ..." This is faith and love at work. We define and start our outreach projects with what we know, what we feel is needed in our community. We don't know everything, we don't know what resources might materialize for us to distribute, we don't know how many people in need will come, we don't know fully the depth of love Jesus has for us and for those we are seeking to support.

What we have is our faith grounded and rooted in love. Simple faith of loving our neighbors and wanting to do something to help them flourish. We don't need to be concerned about scarcity. The abundance of God's riches are already available to us. We just have to tap into them guided by our love and faithfulness and the Holy Spirit. We can accomplish "abundantly" far more than we can ask or imagine.

Just as the three billionaires are visionaries and have created their wealth by pursuing their visions so we too can be similar visionaries for a better and fairer world, creating wealth out of the abundance of God's resources to distribute to those in need. The scale of undertaking may be vastly different but the outcome I feel is vastly more important for our neighbors. We need to act for those in need today.

I would encourage all of you to pray for the church and for our fledgling ministry of Loaves and Fishes. We can imagine growing this into a full in-house feeding program with associated support services for those that come in need. We are invited to be prayerful in drawing on the immense love God has for God's people.

Jesus Christ's love is rooted in us, and through us these important acts of love for our neighbors will come to fruition.

Amen.