

Sermon for the Eighth Sunday after Pentecost
Proper 12 – Year B
RCL Lectionary
2 Kings 4:42-44 / Psalm 145:10-19 / Ephesians 3:14-21 / John 6:1-21

The Episcopal Church of Our Saviour
Mill Valley, California

On Scarcity

The Rev. Richard E. Helmer

Most of you have probably heard by now that my family and I made an offer – with this parish’s help – on a small home a few weeks back. We were stunned that the offer was accepted. But then it turned into one of those experiences that you all might relate to in your own lives: If we knew what we had really been getting into, we might never have done it. Finding a lender, moving mountains of paperwork, the anxieties, the negotiating, the bending over backwards for banks and agents and loan officers. It’s easy to wonder about the dream of home-ownership. . . whether the stability it promises is really worth all the trouble and uncertainty that comes with trying to beat a deadline; of being hungry for something that might never happen, of struggling mightily for an uncertain outcome.

There’s something, quite honestly, that feels mildly obscene about offering nearly half-a-million dollars for a modest two-bedroom condominium in Mill Valley. It’s a huge commitment for a relatively small piece of the scarce bread called real estate in Marin: bread that’s scarce even in the midst of one of the most thundering, devastating economic downturns in living memory.

As members of your Vestry and my family have burnt up countless hours the past few weeks jockeying agreements and paperwork into position trying to make this work, knowing in the back of our minds about countless others panting in line behind us, secretly hoping the little condo falls out of escrow if our deal with the bank heads south or simply runs the clock down, I am reminded of the hungry multitudes sitting on the mountainside, and Philip and Andrew wondering aloud before their Master and Savior if the few baskets are worth sharing. Might it be better to quietly hoard them for the most faithful apostles, and send the crowds away to fend for themselves? Or cast lots to see who among the disciples is to receive a portion of the daily bread?

One of the gnawing anxieties of the human condition is born of scarcity. And our economy, like that of every economy before it must reckon with our sense of lack, our unsatisfied hungers, our view of God’s creation as limited. We attempt in our hearts and minds to lean on a sort of meritocracy - those who compete and win deserve the most; or we fall prey to the forces of random chance, casting lots and calling forth fatalistic notions of God’s will in whatever we receive. We all, as good capitalists, are hardwired to chafe at the socialist notion that someone can divide up the baskets carefully enough so that everyone will get at least something. But the kind of privation that continues to blight the lives of ordinary Cubans and has brought death to millions of North Koreans in the past two decades demonstrates the truth: even a thoroughgoing

scheme by a centralized power to divide up the resources cannot satisfy the world's needs. We require something different.

Three weeks ago as the triennial General Convention of The Episcopal Church began in Anaheim, a crowd of faithful Christians from across the Church filled a large meeting room in the convention center Hilton. In the lap of luxury known only to a relatively small proportion of the world's population, we gathered to mull over our hungers for a starkly trimmed budget for The Episcopal Church in the next triennium. Rumors had been we were facing a 14 million dollar shortfall. That number ballooned quickly to 23 million. Grumbling circulated about the dioceses who hadn't paid their assessments to the wider church in some time.

People spoke to the beleaguered Program, Budget, and Finance committee – or PB&F, as its commonly known by General Convention junkies – the committee charged with making the painful decisions affecting our common life, I was reminded of our vestry agonizing over staff cuts early this year, of local community non-profit boards wrestling with the same challenges, of food pantries turning away the hungry, of the emptying discretionary funds of this and many parishes while the phone continues to ring mercilessly with the cry of human need. I was reminded of the temptations of blame and paralyzing ineptitude that blights our state governments and haunts our nation's capital.

PB&F bit the proverbial bullet and ultimately presented a painful budget for approval by Convention, cutting the positions of some dear friends who will now be looking for work, phasing out favored programs, and radically altering the way The Episcopal Church does mission and ministry for the foreseeable future. Next General Convention will be pared back in scale and length. Travelling widely for various interim meetings is giving way to far less expensive tele- and video conferences. Our shared reductions as a church reflect the cutbacks of the wider world.

But one thing they insisted on keeping: the 1% commitment to the work of helping the world's most impoverished, the practice of sharing first. In a budget reflecting an almost unprecedented sense of scarcity in what has been historically one of the wealthiest Protestant denominations, we said something about today's Gospel - which is about an audacious insistence on abundance even in the face of scarcity.

Philip's assertion today is: "Six months' wages would not buy enough bread for each of them to get a little." God in Christ's response to Philip is the ancient and yet still very much essential response to our living in a world structured around scarcity: give thanks, share of what you have, and bank not on interest, but on the abundance of God's grace that nourishes the root of life itself.

It's a Eucharistic image – one that subverts the very struggles we all face these days, whether we're trying to get in the housing market, hang on to our jobs, keep what we have, or balance our budgets. God's Eucharistic economy is not built on scarcity or cold, calculating distribution of goods by a higher power. Nor is it ultimately constructed on competition or supply-side studies. It is built on an abundant love that refuses to give in to the voices that say that there is never enough.

For me as underwriting does its painstaking work, this is a message that cuts the Gordian knot of competition for a little piece of the real estate pie in Mill Valley. That reminds me of the humility of seeking out a few roots for my family. That puts me back in touch with the struggles of my sisters and brothers who have much harder things to reckon with than buying a condominium. And it puts me in touch again with why Church of Our Saviour is here, and what our mission going forward is fundamentally about.

The truth is, our ultimate problem in the face of God's grace is not one of scarcity, but one of generosity. Our ultimate challenge is to give to one another as God gives to us – to discover the economy that emerges as we share out of even the little we have, and how that subverts the greed and the pain of the present time. Even as we are terrified by the approach of such an abundant God as this, we are reminded at this table that Jesus says, "It is I; do not be afraid."

An abundant message for a troubled time such as ours, and a reminder that we are each nourished beyond words by a God who made us, who saves us, and who will never leave us alone.