

TEXT: Acts 2:42-47; John 10:1-10
THEME: "I (Jesus) came that they may have life . . ."
SUBJECT: Life
TITLE: Abundant Life

Fourth Sunday of Easter
03 May 2020
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There is no doubt that biblical faith witnesses to the wondrous abundance of the creator who has provided creation as a food-producing, life-sustaining system. This is evident from the beginning. In the creation story, Adam and Eve live in a garden where they may eat the fruit of any tree except one. This is evident in the story of the Exodus, with God providing mana for the people to eat during their sojourn in the wilderness. This is affirmed in the assertion of Jesus in the Gospel reading for today: "I come that they may have life, and have it abundantly."

There is also no doubt that since the confiscation and hoarding of Pharaoh in Genesis 47, the world has been organized around coveting that produces scarcity, a scarcity that deeply negates God's gift of abundance. Anxiety about scarcity creates conflict even in families. A brother asks Jesus to intervene in a dispute over family inheritance. Jesus responds to everyone present, "Be wary and guard against all greed, because one's life does not consist in the abundance of one's possessions."

Jesus then tells the parable of the rich man who builds bigger barns to store up his surplus crops. This man talks only to himself. There is no one else in his world, no one at least considered worthy of consulting about what to do with his good fortune. He exclaims, "Soul, you have many goods stored up for many years; take your ease, eat drink, be merry." But God said, "Fool, *they* demand your soul from you . . ." He is possessed by his possessions. This is how it is with those who store up treasure for themselves and are not rich toward God. (Luke 12:13-21)

The issue of abundance verses scarcity is at the heart of the conflict between the world according to Caesar and life in the kingdom of God. Roughly fifty years ago, writes Jan Zwicky, we as a species started using the planet's accumulated resources faster than they are replenished. And we use more of them every day. The wild routinely produces more than it needs. It generates surplus. This is part of its beauty and its grace. But by 2008, humans were using the earth's resources half again as fast as they accrue.

While nature's keynote is abundance, human nature regards perpetual scarcity as the law of life. Living according to the law of scarcity creates scarcity. We have sufficient evidence of this in the very mundane pursuit of toilet paper. The early church knew and practiced a different way. Out of a sense of awe, of reverence for life, all of life, they sold their private property and gave the proceeds to any who had need. Private property became common property. They held the health and well-being of the community to be of greater value than the accumulation of private equity.

I don't expect to see the church recovering this model of life together. Not sure I want to be part of it, even. Why? Do I believe being depends on having, that identity and worth derive from what is possessed? In such a view, to have less is to be less: less worthy, real, or important. To have more is to be more. Do I believe we live in a closed system,

a finite world of limited resources? There is only so much to go around and if everyone has what they need I will have less.

What Jesus' parable about the rich man building bigger barns teaches us, if we have ears to hear, is that the accumulation of commodities has really little or nothing to do with our real good and our real need. Our economy is based on wants. We assume that there are wants everywhere, wants which can only be met by work and still more work. We step up production of more and more mass products. The race between growing demand and never-quite-adequate supply is a race that can never be won.

Of course there are natural, basic wants that have to be satisfied if people want to live, and if they are to live in decent and humane conditions. But our economy has left these basic needs far behind. It is not these natural requirements that dominate our lives and provide the driving power for our economy; it is demands that have been stimulated and artificially heightened. These additional desires are in principle limitless.

Our modern society, Jürgen Moltmann writes, has turned us into voracious monsters. We are tormented by an unquenchable thirst for life. We are possessed by an insatiable hunger for power. The more we have, the more we want, so our appetite is endless and can never be appeased.

Moltmann believes this is so because we are both consciously and unconsciously dominated by a fear of death. "You only live once!" The hunger for pleasure, for possessions, for power; the thirst for recognition through success and admiration - driven by our fear of missing out on something that promises to make us happy, fulfilled.

Our modern economy based on want, our modern ideology of endless expansion, are pacts with death. They are deadly games with human anxiety. They are bets placed on the craving for life, and they are sucking people dry.

The opposite of both poverty and property is community. (Back to the early church and the story in Acts 2:42-47.) In community we become rich: rich in friends, in neighbors, in colleagues, in brothers and sisters. Together, as a community, we can help ourselves in most of our difficulties. We are enough.

"Blessed are those who hunger and thirst for righteousness." So says Jesus. God's destruction of scarcity through God's righteousness creates a new human being, the creature who finds satisfaction in serving God's righteousness and justice. The purpose of human life is not to consume or accumulate but to do justice so that all might live. Doing justice is the path to abundant life.

PRAYER: Mary Oliver, "Summer Story." I invite you to meditate on this poem in an old fashioned way. Get a pencil and a blank piece of paper and copy the poem word for word. Slow down, sit with whatever strikes you.

When the hummingbird

sinks its face
into the trumpet vine,
into the funnels

of the blossoms,
and the tongue
leaps out
and throbs,

I am scorched
to realize once again
how many small, available things
are in this world

that aren't
pieces of gold
or power -
that nobody owns

or could buy even
for a hillside of money -
that just
float about the world,

or drift over the fields,
or into the tents of vines,
and now here I am

spending my time,
as the saying goes,
watching until watching turns into feeling,
so that I feel I am myself

a small bird
with a terrible hunger,
with a thin beak probing and dipping
and a heart that races so fast

it is only a heartbeat ahead of breaking -
and I am the hunger and the assuagement,
and also I am the leaves and the blossoms,
and, like them, I am full of delight, and shaking.